

The Rider

This film is a surprise, an earnest, well crafted portrayal of a life interrupted, based on real events that actually happened to the people depicted. It feels like a documentary in much of its look and method but is in fact a careful fiction, and the “real” players, who could come off as the most obvious kind of amateurs, appear fully authentic and true.

We first encounter Brady Blackburn (Brady Jandreau) as he awakens from a dream of horses in slo-mo then must tend to a vicious wound on his head. It turns out he was a promising rodeo cowboy, but a horrible spill from a bucking bronco has left him badly injured (he has survived a coma and has undergone multiple brain surgeries). We see him excruciatingly pull nasty staples from his wound, knowing that his days performing rodeo are behind him. Doctors have advised him to never ride again. Since being a “rider” has been his whole life, the future looks barren.

Brady lives in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota’s Badlands with his dad Wayne (Tim Jandreau), a Sioux ranchman and widower who has turned sullen and cynical and uses gambling as a crutch. His little sister Lilly (Lilly Jandreau) is a 15-year-old with Asperger’s Syndrome who is full of spirit and love for her brother. He has a coterie of buddies, all rodeo hopefuls, too, and they hearten him, but they also have riding futures he cannot expect. With no work, he spends too much time watching old videos of rodeo competitions. His life is sparked only by visiting best friend Lane Scott, a promising bull rider who had his own rodeo accident and has become brain-damaged and wheelchair bound.

What motivates Brady most is his love of horses, including one on his farm called Gus, whom he can spend pleasant hours riding. But Wayne sells Gus for needed cash, and Brady must turn somewhere to fill his days. With no education or prospects outside of rodeoing, he takes on a job at a supermarket and, in one instance, is hired by a neighbor to tame a wild horse for use. Even that positive experience turns dire when the horse, Apollo, is injured and must be put down by Wayne. What can you do when your whole life plan collapses before you?

A large part of the surprise of “The Rider” is its creator. Chloé Zhao was Beijing-born and US-educated and now works here. She comes to this project from previous experience. In 2015, she won acclaim with the independent “Songs My Brother Taught Me,” another thoughtful take on another struggling Indian family on the Pine Ridge Reservation. It was during filming “Songs” that she discovered Brady and his family and resolved to tell another tale of the plains.

Clearly, the reservation’s world and the stark beauty of Pine Ridge have inspired Zhao. Her use of vivid landscapes is brilliant, especially for multiple scenes shot at the “magic hours” of dawn and dusk, and she and her fine cinematographer (shout out to the talented Joshua James Richards) offer a genuine and generous vision and avoid excess. She tells her watchful story at a measured pace, giving scenes a chance to breathe. Never more so than in a lengthy sequence that shows the true horse trainer that Brady is, gently, serenely, breaking a skittish wild horse to obey him. It is simple yet riveting cinema.

(The film is rated “R” for language and runs 103 minutes.)

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