

Hostile Territory

“Hostile Territory” returns to an old trope of American Westerns, that of the trek or search, here depicted with tension and grit in a new film of that same name. It tells the story of a family torn apart by war which struggles to reunite through a perilous landscape. It incorporates familiar elements of the genre: battles with hostile natives while moving in tough terrain while Indian-style pipe music quavers on the sound track

“Hostile Territory” is a western of the old school set in the aftermath of the American Civil War, predictable but resolute. Returning home after having done time as a POW, former Union soldier Jack Calgrove (Brian Presley), learns too late that his wife has died and his three children, now presumed orphans, have been shipped on an “orphan train” to a new life farther west. Crushed, Jack undertakes a relentless search to find them. Unfortunately, the train is heading deeper into dangerous country where it will cross the old enemy lines. Calgrove and another former soldier are joined in their search by a troop of Native American sharpshooters and a freed slave.

Meanwhile, on the train, the Calgrove’s oldest son, Phil (Cooper North), must act as head of the family, which picks up other orphans and exiles along the way, whom Phil is asked to adopt. Once in Indian country, the train is attacked by Cheyenne marauders and a gunfight ensues, during which one of the Calgroves is killed, and the family must regroup. Jack, on the orphans’ trail, comes upon the aftermath of the slaughter which helps identify their presumed direction.

The orphan convoy then moves through wintry country, often harsh and unforgiving, but also beautifully photographed in Colorado locations by veteran cinematographer Mark David. Its rugged, but also poetic, look is reminiscent of earlier Western dramas, such as the classic “The Searchers,” as well as more recent pictures like “Mustang,” “The Rider,” and especially, “Hostiles” (2017) directed by Scott Cooper and starring Christian Bale and Rosamund Pike.

Eventually, the orphans shift their company into two wagons, where they are even more vulnerable to attack. When another tribe threatens them, Jack and his band finally intercept them and engage the marauders in a bloody exchange.

Be aware that the final battle is a rough and bloody affair, earning a hard “R” rating. It is also unnecessarily prolonged on screen and—as happened in so many American Westerns—unrealistic in that the antagonists are able to subdue each other with one fatal blow or shot. It makes for a facile denouement to what has been mostly a hard-bitten saga of the West.

“Hostile Territory” appears to be a very personal project for actor Brian Presley, a Texan who has been performing in films since the late 1990’s. This is his second feature film as director, and he serves as writer and lead also. He

even finds work for his daughter, Emma, who plays his youngest daughter, the intrepid Lizzy, in the picture.

Priestley doesn't offer much originality but pushes many of the right buttons for many who value the genre.

(The film, rated "R" for serious violence, runs 153 minutes, and opened in theaters April 22nd and will be available later in the month on VOD).

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