

## Sicario

“Sicario” comes from the Latin for “dagger.” In the new movie from Canadian director Denis Villeneuve and screenwriter Taylor Sheridan, it takes on its contemporary meaning as “hit man,” a useful profession in the malevolent drug trade at our Mexican border. Within this grim environment walks one tough lady, Kate Macur (Emily Blunt), an FBI agent out of Phoenix who runs a kidnap combat squad but is continually frustrated when her hostage rescues end up with dead bodies. Hoping to get to the traffickers themselves, the source of the killings, she is selected by her Department of Justice superior (Victor Garber) to partner with a new, mysterious government squad to go after the source of the brutal traffic. Thus is the set-up for “Sicario,” an intense new movie that may test your appetite for drug dramas.

The new SWAT team that Kate joins, along with her FBI colleague Reggie (Daniel Kalunya), is headed by the waggish Matt Graver (Josh Brolin), part kidder and part conman, who says he is with “DOD,” associated with a mysterious intelligence organization that looks to capture drug lord Manuel Diaz who oversees the vicious cross-border trade. Matt looks to lure Diaz into the open by capturing his brother Guillermo and transporting him into Arizona. Working with Matt’s commando-like comrades is Alejandro (Benicio del Toro), a mysterious Latino (origins uncertain) who seems to be around for intelligence and language purposes but who also carries with him aura of silent menace and command.

Kate’s role at first is that of observer, but the longer she participates in the anti-drug unit, the more doubts she has, wondering out loud what kind of authority they have and uncomfortable about the kind of procedures they follow. She is, after all, a lawyer and an FBI professional, and questions the kind of strong arm tactics that pull Guillermo out of Ciudad Juarez. Her protests amount to little against the single-mindedness of Matt, who believes they must “stir the pot” to get the job done. When a raid of an elaborate cross-border tunnel results in Manuel’s capture, Kate realizes that her very presence in the unit was an attempt to use her status to cover the operation.

Director Villeneuve has, in a short career, made a specialty of somber, twisty dramas with elements of dread and threat, like “Incendies” and “Prisoners.” “Sicario” is fully in this vein, with even splashier flashes of violence. Some of that violence is shown in impressive set pieces, which exhibit stirring pacing, much aided by one of the best cinematographers in the business, Roger Deakins. One such piece involves an ominous caravan of black SUVs which portends a massive car chase, but which ends up with a gruesome shoot-out in stalled traffic. Another is the vertiginous raid and gun-battle in the tunnel (mentioned above), which displays a dazzling and disorienting choreography all its own. A final sequence, where Alejandro confronts his nemesis, the true Mexican kingpin, over a dinner table will be stomach-churning for many.

Filmgoers take note: “Sicario” is hard-R violent, not in gore, but in gunplay and body count. That body count is high, but the killings are—probably like the drug trade itself—quick and final. Rare dashes of humor are merely sardonic; a sense of both threat and betrayal are omnipresent, heightened by a pulsing score. In a way, Emily Blunt’s character sums up the tenor of the film. Her Kate, invariably morose with no

makeup and favoring shapeless T-shirts, sees little surcease from the calamities of the drug trade, and the audience can only agree.

*(This film is definitely "R" rated and runs a tension-packed 121 minutes).*

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