3:10 to Yuma

Talent: Russell Crowe, Christian Bale, Ben Foster, Peter Fonda, Gretchen Mol, Logan Lerman, Alan Tudyk.

Date of review: Thursday 14th February, 2008

Director: James Mangold
Duration: 122 minutes
Classification: MA
We rate it: Four stars.

Fifty years ago, Elmore Leonard (these days most revered as a crime writer, whose novels include Get Shorty, Out of Sight and Killshot, which has also just been filmed) wrote a short story called 3:10 to Yuma. It centred around the struggle to escort a nasty stagecoach-robber and gunslinger, Ben Wade (here played by Russell Crowe) to a train that would transport him to Yuma prison. Delmer Daves directed a film version in 1957 which starred Van Heflin and Glenn Ford, and which was well-received as a decent Western made during the classical Hollywood cycle. These days of course, really good, traditional Westerns are few and far between, but James Mangold’s updating and remake of Leonard’s story proves to be a terrific return to this tried and true genre. Mainly for lads it may well be, but it’s a hell of a pic if you fit the demographic.

Crowe is here paired with the equally-intense Christian Bale, an actor who I think could do almost anything. After starting out as a youngster discovered by Steven Spielberg to take the lead in 1987’s Empire of the Sun, Bale has consistently chosen fascinating and demanding roles, and his turn here as the complex and flawed Dan Evans is as engaging as ever. Having dropped an alarming amount of weight to play the skeletal lead in The Machinist (2004) he beefed up again to bring new life to the Batman franchise with Batman Begins (2005); here he’s down to a more “normal” appearance, playing a rancher in late 1800s US who is struggling to make a living off the land and feed his family. In the film’s engaging opening scenes, Evans and his sons unwittingly get in the way of a stage-robbing, as Crowe and his gang waylay and blow up a coach on its way to the bank in the next town. Bloody events ensue, and before we know it, Crowe’s Ben Wade (a criminal with a strangely developed sense of moral obligation) is on the run, only to be apprehended by a rather nervous bunch of men from Pinkertons’ Detective Agency. Evans, desperate for money, is deputised to help transport Wade to the train and load him off for jail, and thus a chase is set in motion as what’s left of Wade’s gang set off in hot pursuit.

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James Mangold, who has directed a number of very different films over the last few years (from the charming romantic comedy Kate and Leopold to the unnerving thriller Identity) here makes a rousing, intense and at times violent Western that John Ford himself may well have been proud of. There’s character development aplenty here, as the ever-charismatic pair of actors inject their respective characters with moral and emotional complexities many audience members would find surprising; Crowe’s Wade is indeed a vicious man at times, but he’s possessed of a moral code that is in its way as demanding and as strict as is Evans’. Bale, as Dan, is a flawed and reluctant hero; he wants to do what’s right and provide for his family, but he struggles with his past in a way that belies his own less-than-entirely-reputable background. All of this helps to make 3:10 to Yuma the compelling and action-filled Western that it is.

Mangold has done something tremendous here by revitalising what has always been one of the cinema’s most interesting genres. Replete with a well-maintained historical background and engaging period detail (not to mention wagon-loads of action and some truly startling shoot-outs) 3:10 to Yuma will be a joy for those enamoured of Westerns, and may well convert non-fans to what is these days a rare bird: a Western with brains.

Nick Prescott