

“The Mustang”

As the film opens we see a herd of wild horses on a rolling plain with snow-capped peaks in the background. They are peacefully grazing when suddenly a helicopter appears and the horses bolt in fear. It is not a chance occurrence. The chopper is herding them towards a holding pen from which they will be sent to a nearby penitentiary. There they will be matched up with prisoners who will spend months domesticating them so they can later be sold at auction, the proceeds of which will go to a Wild Mustang Conservation Program. One of the horses will be the catalyst for changing the life of inmate Roman Coleman (Matthias Schoenaerts).

Coleman is an uncommunicative loner who has a job at the bottom of the prison food chain - shoveling horse manure. One day he hears banging coming from a small barn. He walks over to the barn and sees a horse desperately kicking the walls trying to get out. Like Coleman the horse is also a prisoner. That encounter brings Coleman into contact with Myles (Bruce Dern) the crusty rancher in charge of the horse training program. Myles gives him a shot at working with one of the horses. It gets off to a good start but when the horse doesn't respond to any of his efforts, Coleman's short fuse proves to be his undoing. Myles tells him he never wants to see his face again and boots him from the program.

Coleman's pregnant daughter Martha is also fed up with him. Their prison visits become increasingly hostile and only later in the film do we learn the source of her anger. So nothing is going Coleman's way until one night when a thunderstorm sweeps over the prison and the panicked horses have to be taken from their corrals to an enclosed barn. It is pandemonium but Coleman pitches in and based on his performance that night Myles takes him back into the program.

Myles matches him with Marquis, one of the most difficult of the mustangs. Despite his attempts to calm the horse Coleman is getting nowhere. He loses his temper again and exhausted and frustrated he sinks to the ground. At that point something happens he could not have anticipated. It is a great movie moment which will warm the heart of horse lovers everywhere.

There are a number of things which make “The Mustang” (the story is based on an actual prison training program) such a cinematic pleasure. They include:

The casting from the leads down to the smallest role is impeccable. Schoenaerts has perfectly captured the brooding soul of Roman Coleman and nowhere more so than when he tries to explain the unexplainable to his daughter. His face is a mask of grief as he tries to choke out an apology for something he did which can never be undone. As is no surprise Dern, as a crusty old timer, commands the screen and Jason Mitchell as Henry, the ever sunny trick rider and Coleman's muse and Gideon Adlon as Martha are equally up to the task. Then there are the host of tattoo covered prisoners who may or may not be actors.

A scene in which a counselor is conducting a session with a group of prisoners. At one point she asks them to discuss their victims. How long did it take them to make the decision which sealed the fate of both their victims and themselves. Their answers are revealing.

Watching the nuts and bolts of how wild horses are trained. It is a slow and painstaking process but ultimately produces a bond between these graceful creatures and their riders. Seeing the riders as they gallop across the open range in celebration of the end of the training is an exhilarating sight and as close as many of these men will ever come to experiencing freedom.

The culmination of all their work as the riders proudly circle the ring to display their horses as the auctioneer seeks bids. It is Coleman and Marquis' moment to shine but then chance intervenes. What happens in the days that follow will provide Coleman with a rare test of character. At great personal sacrifice he rises to the occasion.

“The Mustang” is a film which you will not soon forget.

(Amazon Prime)