

“Hell or High Water”

“Hell or High Water” is modern-day Western set in the bleak West Texas outback. Brothers Toby (Chris Pine) and Tanner (Ben Foster) are bank robbers. Adept at covering their tracks, they leave few clues and have a unique way of disposing of their getaway cars. There is only one cloud on their criminal horizon, Texas Ranger Marcus Hamilton (Jeff Bridges).

Marcus and his stoic and long suffering partner Alberto (Gil Birmingham) have little to go on as they investigate the first robbery. The bank’s security camera is on the fritz and the only description they have is of two masked men cleaning out the cash drawers. But then the brothers storm another bank and Marcus gets his first inkling of what is going on. He can’t quite connect the dots until the volatile Tanner pushes the envelope a little too hard one day. Then the pieces of the puzzle start coming together. Marcus thinks the brothers have something more in mind than simple bank heists. But whether his theory is correct is an open question.

“Hell or High Water” is an instructive example of how one can make a compelling film with a limited budget and an original idea. The storyline and crisp dialogue come from the pen of the screenwriter of one of my favorites films (“Sicario”) and the acting and sense of place are as good as it gets. Jeff Bridges (no doubt to be forever known as the “Dude” in “The Big Lebowski”) was made for the role of Marcus. An acerbic lawman on the verge of retirement, his drawl conceals an acute intelligence. A lifetime in law enforcement has also made him a trenchant and comic observer of the folkways of West Texas. He is a joy to watch.

All of the other leads are equally up to the task from Foster’s free-wheeling and hyper Tanner, to Pine’s morose and reflective Toby and Birmingham’s stoic Alberto, who must put up with Marcus’s genial needling of his Mexican/Indian heritage, including a colorful and invidious comparison between Texas football and Mexican soccer.

The careful casting is especially evident in the host of secondary characters. Whether it is old timers sitting at a restaurant, a burly Comanche at a casino or a blowsy and intrusive waitress, some of them seem so authentic that you wonder if they are professional actors rather than locals pressed into service. My favorite is a waitress who takes (well perhaps “takes” is the wrong word) Marcus and Alberto’s order. It is small jewel of comic invention right up there with such classic diner scenes as those in “Five Easy Pieces” and “When Harry Met Sally”.

There is also another important central character in the film – the stark and lonely landscape of West Texas. (Although, filmed in New Mexico). Endless scrublands, oil rigs and pump jacks, windblown towns with empty storefronts and ever present billboards offering everything from legal services to debt relief dot the landscape. We may be a long way from the iconic Monument Valley locations of John Ford but the setting of “Hell or High Water” is no less memorable.

(Amazon Prime)