



The final film to look at in this week’s review of the major contenders is the one that is currently considered the favorite, “The Hurt Locker”. That this film is in this position is quite a story in itself. The movie only made \$12 million at the box office, which would make it the lowest grossing film to ever win Best Picture. That would make it a true “David Vs Goliath” story as everyone knows how many bajillion dollars “Avatar” has raked in over the past three months.

The other bit of side drama is the competition for Best Director between James Cameron and the director of “The Hurt Locker”, Kathryn Bigelow, who just so happens to be James Cameron’s ex-wife.

So with that as the background, let’s look at the movie itself.

As noted numerous times in my columns, movies about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been box office poison. The general public just doesn’t want to go out and see them, even if they are not films that would be considered either “pro-war” or “anti-war”. This is a shame, as there have been a couple of pretty decent films that have come out on the subject. “In the

Valley of Elah” is one of them, and this is another. But while “In the Valley of Elah” is predominately a mystery set in the U.S. with the wars serving only as background, “The Hurt Locker” puts you right in the middle of the action, and rarely focuses on anything else.

The movie takes place in the early months after the overthrow of Saddam’s forces in Iraq, and it follows a three man bomb disposal team as they go about their day to day activities in a country where every pile of rubbish or unusually sized lump of sand could be hiding an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). The team is led by Staff Sergeant James, played by Jeremy Renner, a “white trash” nobody in the “real world” who finds that due to his contradictory nature of being simultaneously reckless while having a keen eye for details, he is a near hero to the troops due to his fearlessness in dismantling bombs.

This puts him immediately at odds with Sgt Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), who is a staunch believer in caution and protocol at all points. The third member of the team is Spc Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), a well meaning young man who only wants to get home in one piece, but is becoming more and more depressed with the fear that he won’t.

The movie is much more of an action film than it is a character study, although it very much succeeds in showing us some very interesting individuals. Renner, despite a resume that makes him a relative unknown to most people, does a superlative job as the tightly strung adrenaline junkie James. His recklessness will drive you nuts at times as you see it, while in other instances you will admire that trait, all the while thinking about those men who are doing this in real life, and respecting them all the more for seeing what it takes to do this job. For that reason, Renner is definitely worthy of the nomination he received for Best Actor.

Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal are to be commended for showing the relationships between the men as 100% real, warts and all, rather than to fall back on clichés showing them working as a perfectly tuned team, or worse, showing them as stereotypical stressed out soldiers constantly fighting with one another.

In this film, you get both sides of it. Yes, there are numerous conflicts between James and Sanborn, but at the same time, there is undeniable respect of the talents each man brings to the team, and the unquestioned duty to their missions, which require them to subjugate their personal feelings for the good of the Army, and the protection of their fellow soldiers.

Bigelow puts together an action movie that is every bit as exciting as what “one of the boys” could do, but she knows that while big explosions can make for entertaining movies, there must be more than just explosions for their own sake. She accomplishes this by having several near cameo type roles by familiar actors, having them cross paths with our three heroes in very unusual manners. Guy Pearce is excellent as the serene, competent first leader of the Bomb Disposal Unit. David Morse makes a brief appearance as a Colonel so impressed with James' feats that his doting on him almost sends Sanborn over the edge. Christian Carmago, known best to those reading my columns as Dexter Morgan's psychotic older brother Brian (the Ice Truck Killer) in that wonderful series, has the largest role of those outside of the team, as an Army psychiatrist trying to help Eldridge through his depression.

Most interesting is Ralph Fiennes as a British mercenary who crosses paths with the team out in the desert, who is then pinned down by a sniper; a scene that solidly shows how men who may not agree with each other back at the barracks can use their training and discipline to pull together and work perfectly as a team to accomplish an objective, remaining calm in the face of death.

The film is actually set in the first few months of the war, which gives it a bit of a postwar feel to it, as if we are able to look back at how things were, as opposed to how things are now. As such, it doesn't pass any judgment on the war itself, it just shows you the impossible jobs some soldiers were asked to carry out under circumstances that should make most of us ashamed to ever again complain about how “stressful” our jobs are.

The only fault I have in the film is that it went off the reservation somewhat for about 20 minutes regarding James out for revenge after the death of a 12 year old Iraqi boy that he had been buying bootleg movies from. From all accounts from soldiers that served in Iraq at the time, there was no way James could have went off base in the manner that he did, and even less of a chance that they'd just let him wander back into the base unchallenged when he came back. The whole sequence seemed contrived and unrealistic, and since it came in the last third of the film, it really did knock this film down from being great to just being very good.

But “very good” in this case still makes for a film that is very worthy of its Oscar nomination. There is a distinct chance that “The Hurt Locker” will win Best Picture, and if it does, I will have no qualms with that.

My Rating – Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)