



The Coen Brothers' remake of the iconic John Wayne film "True Grit" completely snuck up on me. Try as I might, I couldn't quite shake The Duke from my thoughts as I watched it, no matter how different Jeff Bridges played the role of Rooster Cogburn. Watching the film was almost disconcerting; it seemed so original and fresh; but also so familiar.

As the story went on, however, I was drawn more and more into it, and accordingly left my preconceived notions further and further behind. When I left the theater, I was immediately thinking that I saw a very good movie. But the more and more I have thought about it over the past 24 hours, I am convinced I have seen one of the best movies of the year.

The entire concept of this movie seems a bit off kilter. Why remake a movie from over forty years ago...especially a Western; a dying genre? And then to choose one that is forever linked to Wayne's one and only Academy Award? Just what the hell were Ethan and Joel Coen thinking? Had their egos swollen up so much after "No Country for Old Men" that they thought

they could do no wrong?

Perhaps their egos are larger than they should be; but that's not what I'm judging here: I am judging THIS film, and trying to do so on its own merits. Trying...but it's almost impossible to do that; which is a shame.

It turns out that the Coen Brothers are huge fans of the original Charles Portis novel, and chose to stick closely to the tone, characters, and plot from that book. What that meant was that we have a film that is slow to start out, and is very talky, with characters delivering lines in an almost Shakespearean manner.

The three main characters are also quite different from the original film. And this film is so much better for it.

Now I will warn you at this point that if you are a diehard Wayne fan; one who has a collection of all his movies, and thinks that he is the Greatest Actor of All Time, you will hate this movie.

And that is because the biggest difference in the 1969 movie from this one is the character Rooster Cogburn. In the book, and in this film, he is a mess. He looks like a modern day street person, is drunk half of the time, and has a sense of morals that I would not consider very admirable. Yes, he is a lawman, but he's more of a bounty hunter and serial killer with a badge, and he doesn't seem the least bit bothered by killing someone. It is not a "heroic" character in any sense of the word, which is why John Wayne would want to play it differently, so Cogburn became just another Wayne creation. Rascally, for certain, but still no doubt a "hero". Just go back and watch two other Wayne Westerns near the same time; "Chisum" and "Big Jake", and then tell me the difference between the three lead "characters". There wasn't any (at least in my opinion).

Jeff Bridges deserves accolades just for having the guts to take on such a role. Last week I talked about how he played Kevin Flynn in "Tron Legacy" as an older version of The Dude from his Coen Brothers' film "The Big Lebowski". In "True Grit", there is no trace of The Dude or The Duke. Bridges plays him exactly as he was written in the book; disgusting warts and all...but at the same time, he shows enough humanity creeping through his body that you can see him starting to grow respect for young Mattie Ross; respect that turns into admiration and a level of

true parental concern and love towards the end.

Glen Campbell, a huge recording and television star in 1969, played the original role of LeBeouf, a Texas Ranger also tracking down the man who killed Mattie's father. The role in that film was also modified, as LeBeouf became the young sidekick to Cogburn. It is much different here with Matt Damon playing the part. LeBeouf is a bit of a dandy; a greedy hothead who is simply after the reward money. He and Cogburn also don't get along; nor is he the least bit happy about Mattie coming with them. These facts lead to him leaving the group on more than one occasion.

Once again, the role as written requires an actor who is not only talented, but also secure enough in his reputation that he wouldn't have a problem playing such a non glamorous role. Damon impresses, and shows why he and Leonardo DiCaprio continue to be thought of as the best actors of their age.

This is all for naught if the filmmakers strike out on choosing the actress to play Mattie Ross. In the first film, it was Kim Darby, a 22 year old woman playing the role of a 14 year old...something that I feel didn't work (nor did it work to have an implied flirtation/budding romance between Mattie and LeBeouf). Mattie is the central character in the novel, not Cogburn, and it was imperative to find a young actress who was up to the challenge.

Succeed they did, with newcomer Hailee Steinfeld, in her first movie role, more than holding her own with talents such as Bridges and Damon. Still just thirteen at the time of shooting, young Hailee was incredible in capturing this totally unique character. She has quite a future in front of her.

And make no mistake; Mattie is the centerpiece of this film. In fact, you see almost nothing of Cogburn for the first thirty minutes. This is the Old West (Central Arkansas, which at the time WAS the frontier), so Mattie has little time to waste in mourning for the passing of her beloved father. She is very puritanical, with an alarmingly rigid sense of right and wrong. Her father was killed by a drifter named Tom Chaney, therefore he must be brought to justice. To do so, Mattie is so obsessed that nothing will deter her. If that means she must spend the first night in town sleeping at the funeral parlor next to three corpses, so be it. She needs money first, so she goes about verbally ambushing the local shady horse trader in a scene that was quite humorous in the mismatch she proved to be for the older man.

Next on her list is to find the meanest U.S. Marshall in the area to track down Cheney into Indian Country (Oklahoma). This is where she meets up with Cogburn, and eventually tempts him with enough money to take on the dangerous mission.

Once rolling along, the film becomes a bit of an Odyssey, as they travel into the wilderness that is much more brutal than what you normally see. There are no sweeping vistas here; just snow, heavy brush, and danger at every turn as they track down a gang of outlaws who have given refuge to Chaney.

To me, the film had a very similar feel to Clint Eastwood's masterpiece "Unforgiven". There was no romanticizing anything. These were harsh times and a harsh land; so the people in them needed to adapt to the conditions if they were to survive. No real debate happens between Right and Wrong: Mattie and Cogburn are Right in chasing the criminals, and the criminals are low lives who deserve their fate (and also very well played in the small roles by Josh Brolin as Cheney and Barry Pepper as Lucky Ned Pepper).

I kept looking for the Coen Brothers to make some modification in order to add in their usual touches of strangeness; either in the characters' behavior or in the script itself. But that never came about. It seems that Joel and Ethan realized that Charles Portis was the same type of writer as they are, and in just simply transferring his dialog and characters to screen, they came up with a movie that is very much in their "style".

It's not your usual Western. It's not your usual Coen Brothers' movie. It's not your usual remake.

It is a most unusual movie. And one of the best of 2010.

My Rating – Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)