

ARTS



Tommy Lee Jones plays the sheriff in 'No Country for Old Men'. He is the film's hero, but seems to lose interest in his mission and pontificates wearily instead

Technical brilliance isn't enough



No Country for Old Men

15 CERT, 122 MINS

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

I can't help it: the moment violence is mixed with grand philosophy in a movie I get suspicious. Having sat through so many cheap Quentin Tarantino flicks, in which clever-sounding bon mots lend an air of respectability to raw bloodlust, my critical hackles are immediately raised. The Coen brothers' new film *No Country for Old Men* has the added disadvantage of arriving in London on a wave of awards and critical hype, which is also usually a bad sign. I determined to give it a chance.

The first thing that struck me, from the opening frames of vast Texan landscape, is that I was in the hands of technical masters. The choice of shots, the framing, the lighting, sound, editing – all those things you never really think about – remain flawless throughout this film. I rarely was lyrical about the technical aspects of a movie but in this case it explains at least some of the buzz it has been generating. It is palpa-

ble. You feel, throughout, that you are in the hands of a marvellously confident storyteller, pulling you relentlessly forward.

The first scene introduces the villain, Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), walking along a highway as if planted there from nowhere. Clad in black, with a strange 1970s barnet and a chillingly impressive expression, he seems like an angel of death even before he starts murdering people. Oh yes, first he kills a young sheriff, then an old man, then another, brutally and horrifically, usually with an air-powered cattle-slaughtering device he carries around with him everywhere. He is an alien death-monger wrongly dropped into what seems a pleasant folksy world.

Then we meet Llewellyn Moss (Josh Brolin) – the cowboy, the normal guy, out hunting in the wilderness when he comes across a hellish scene of carnage. Dead bodies everywhere, guns, dead dogs, cars with broken windows, flies buzzing, all being cooked in the Texan sunlight. This is a failed drug handover, and in one of the suitcases is two and a half million dollars. This suitcase will be Llewellyn's curse, as he decides to take it away with him. He goes back to his sweatshirt (our very own Kelly MacDonnell speaking with a convincing Texan accent) and tells her to pack her bags. You guessed it: Death Boy is looking for his money, and is coming to get him.

But it is the third man character, Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), who, although less visible, is somehow the anchor of the film. His life story is told over the opening credits – he has been a sheriff since the age of 26, his father was before him, and so on – seems friendly, rural, part of the landscape. In this context, the arrival of Chigurh at first seems like an aberration. But having already noticed that Llewellyn didn't seem that shocked by the hellish scene he found ("You have to say, OK, I'll be part of this world"), and was quite canny in finding the

terrifying; Javier Bardem's performance is spellbindingly creepy – implacable, inhuman, without motive – and Llewellyn's struggle impressively chirpy. But as the focus moves to high concepts (the murderer asks his victims to call their fate on a coin toss, for example) and finally to folksy musings on the nature of things ("this is no country for old men") I got a bit lost. The sheriff, our guide and hero, seems to lose interest in saving Llewellyn in favour of misty-eyed stares and weary pontificating. Stop mumbering and get on with your job, I felt like shouting.

You feel, throughout, that you are in the hands of a marvellously confident storyteller

suicide with money, it is eventually from the sheriff's pensive, unsurprised face that we learn that this kind of thing happens all the time here. It is 1980 and near the border with Mexico drug crime is rife. Violence, not quaintness, is actually the defining product of this bleak world.

The pace is menacingly slow, almost languid. It is barren, macho, occasionally funny, distinctly Coen brothers. But there is something odd about the movement from Stephen King horror through Tarantino Western to Thomas Hardy essay on the horror of things. Some scenes, as the apparently invulnerable Chigurh nears his target, are

terrifying; Javier Bardem's performance is spellbindingly creepy – implacable, inhuman, without motive – and Llewellyn's struggle impressively chirpy. But as the focus moves to high concepts (the murderer asks his victims to call their fate on a coin toss, for example) and finally to folksy musings on the nature of things ("this is no country for old men") I got a bit lost. The sheriff, our guide and hero, seems to lose interest in saving Llewellyn in favour of misty-eyed stares and weary pontificating. Stop mumbering and get on with your job, I felt like shouting.

The ending is so perfunctory, so different to what you are led to expect from the start, that it can't help but feel disappointing. The action moves from centre-stage to off-screen reports, referencing the high tragedy of the thing, and it feels like the final words of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* ("Justice was done. And the president of the immortals... had ended his sport with Tess") might be paraphrased at any moment.

But you are left wondering what you are supposed to be talking about at dinner afterwards. You can't just talk about the craft, and the quality of the acting and film-making, right? Should you be giggling excitedly about the horror of the nightmare villain? Or was there a moral to the story somewhere, other than that Bad Things Happen? To justify all that violence, in my book, you've got to do better than that.

Lesser-spotted Gergiev brings magic to Mahler



Mahler symphonies

LSO / GERGIEV, BARBICAN

It's an odd thing. Gustav Mahler could work only in complete silence. Sounds from across a lake, or the local bandstand, a bird dancing on the eaves would drive him into a rage. He complained endlessly about it as he tried to complete his fourth symphony in 1900; the noise of nature and reality, the "barbarity of the outside world", as he called it.

He fled each summer to the tiny village of Maiernigg, on the Worthersee in southern Austria, to compose in total seclusion and total peace, in a wooden hut that he had built in the middle of a forest – his *Komponierhäuschen*.

Even here, in a sealed nowhere, things would get to him. But it's odd. Mahler's music seems infused with every smudge and crease and stain of sonic reality, particularly the sonic reality of country living. How could someone who appeared to flinch reality's sounds so much to reality's generous hubbub?

But then maybe he didn't flinch from the world. Maybe the idea that his music is a mere soundtrack or tracing of reality is wrong.

Mahler, after all, was not an impressionist but a romantic. He was not charting reality through surreal metaphors but conjuring up a unique world of his own. He was creating his own space, using his own musical language, as variegated and diffuse and fractured and lyrical as our own, but crucially not our own.

Appropriately he was trying to imitate our world at all. His sonic landscapes live parallel to the real one, in competition with it, not nestled in it. Maybe this is why those birds made him so angry. Or perhaps they really were barabous.

What would he have made of the lesser-spotted Valery Gergiev landing on his score? The Russian was conducting Mahler's first and fourth symphonies with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican Hall last weekend.

And Gergiev, as usual, was adding his own acoustic effects. Competitive sucks, tensed grunts and humming. All very loud, and a match for the orchestra at times.

Admittedly these vocal exertions seem to have a point – most of the time. Like a tennis player's grunts and squeaks and imitations they are there to facilitate the shot or, in the case of Gergiev, convey the manner in which the orchestra

should hit the next note. When it works – when the suck does elicit a softer landing or an attenuated end – then the act is breathtaking, a sort of magic. When it misses the mark, it's embarrassing.

In Mahler's first, the orchestra really played for him. The violins let rip, following Gergiev's bracing tempi all the way. The cello smothered each phrase lovingly. The flute trips and clattered hooks that flitter in and out of the piece as if it's the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* were a joy, beautifully phrased. The still heart of the whole symphony, however, was the whispered trio: a flighty, lustrous, quietly ecstatic wisp of a love-song that, for me, seemed to drive the whole piece.

The final movement was exhilarating. Awesome. It was met with a much deserved standing ovation. In the fourth, awe was less abundant. Gergiev had his head buried in the score and beat a strict, slow, unyielding tempo, delivering each swoop and wave (tempi undulations that make this piece what it is) with as much grace as a 12-year-old's plotting of a parabola.

Again, it was precise but it was also very cold, very fragmented, a mechanical menagerie, like some-thing Boulez might turn out, but without the conviction or charm. Where was the third, the naivety, the fun? Where was the sense – the sense you get in the amazing 1939 Mengelberg recording – of a child leading us through a theme park made of ice cream?

Having said all this, there were some interesting things: a long postlude in the long adagio, some wonderful deep colours; and a whole number of pungent moments reminiscent of Shostakovich or Prokofiev.

The final movement, a vision of heaven seen through the eyes of a child, was sung unaffectedly by Laura Claycomb, though she seemed troubled by the phrasing of the recurring lilt that begins each stanza. Appropriately she was given over to the harp, its tolling bass notes, silk strings wrapped with wire. A sound somewhere between a thud and clank. It's a Malerian speciality and Gergiev indulged us, allowing them to return to their fullest.

There were two other pieces scheduled with the Mahler symphonies – neither very pleasant memories. Kaykas was overly careful in the Sibelius violin concerto. Schönberg overly everything in his *Pelleas and Melisande*, an amusing and exhausting experience.

"He will never produce good elevator music," someone once said of Gergiev. In the fourth, Gergiev nearly did. But in the first we nearly missed our floor: a first-rate performance to knock you down dead. Radio Three is playing it again at the end of the month. Whatever you do, don't miss it.

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Too nice even for Sunday

TELEVISION REVIEW

Lark Rise to Candleford

SUNDAY, BBC ONE

If there's a law of television that the BBC is currently banking on it is that costume dramas on a Sunday evening go down a treat. We've had *Cranford*, *Sense and Sensibility* and now *Lark Rise to Candleford* bringing up the rear. Perhaps because the same actors keep cropping up (Julia Sawalha in *Cranford* and *Lark Rise*, Linda Bassett in *Lark Rise* and *Sense and Sensibility*) it's starting to seem like a slightly unimaginative strategy. Never mind, the BBC is extremely good at this kind of thing, so we needn't worry, need we?

Lark Rise, loosely inspired by Flora Thompson's much-loved memoir, tells the story of Laura (Olivia Hallinan), an Oxfordshire village girl who's sent to the nearby town of Candleford to work as an apprentice in the post office. In the first of 10 episodes we see her leaving her beloved family and friends to start a new life in a strange new world, a world of hot baths, dress shops and stobbery.

Taken under the wing of postmistress Dorcas Lane (Julia Sawalha), she discovers her country background sets some of the townspeople against her (a couple of nasty spinsters make her feel particularly unwell come). Further machina-

tion set Candleford against tiny *Lark Rise*, putting the new arrival in an awkward position. Telegrams sent to the hamlet are subject to a charge of 3s 6d because it's more than eight miles from the post office. This means that when head postman Thomas Brown (*Green Wing*'s Mark Heap) rides out with an urgent message for village elder Queenie about her brother's ill health, she can't afford to take delivery. The next day another telegram arrives with news of his death. When all this comes to light the villagers are incensed.

To calm things down, local squire Sir Timothy Midwinter (Ben Miles) suggests a grand measuring exercise to decide once and for all if *Lark Rise* really is more than eight miles from Candleford. Yes, that's about as dramatic as it gets. There are, doubtless, affairs of the heart on the horizon (some pretty heavy hints were dropped about suave Sir Timothy and prim Miss Lane), but for now the action hinges on a dispute about post office regulations. Whether you enjoy it depends, I suppose, on whether you fancy a change from the usual television diet of murder, suspense and betrayal; otherwise it might just bore you rigid.

Lark Rise is nice enough to look at. We can rest assured that the frocks are historically accurate and the troupe of actors (who must be employed on some kind of "classic adaptation"

rolling contract) do their job pretty well. A great one to see Olivia Hallinan again, though you wonder if winsome Laura will give her a much opportunity to show off her range as the role she's best known for: Kim in Chanel 4's edgy *Sexual*. *Lark Rise* comes across as rather deliberate in costume drama mode, but Dawn French is a treat as the mother of four who spends all her money on ale.

I suspect *Lark Rise* will get some flak for being too genteel, too nice. Certainly, it's pleasantly to let the Oxfordshire accents lull you into a haze of nostalgia for deep England. But a lot of people want something a bit meatier, even on a lazy Sunday.

I also have the feeling that *Lark Rise* could mark the tipping point for the viewing public's tolerance of the current state of BBC costume dramas – or at least the point when it all begins to seem a bit too quiet enough. Ultimately I'm not sure that *Lark Rise* offers anything more than a forgettable diversion: nice, yes, but a little dim.

Dagor Shariatmadari

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