

MOVIES | MOVIE REVIEW

Moonshine County That Is Stirred, Not Shaken

‘Lawless,’ With Shia LaBeouf, a Film by John Hillcoat

Lawless | Directed by John Hillcoat | Crime, Drama | R | 1h 56m

By A. O. SCOTT AUG. 28, 2012

John Hillcoat’s new movie, “Lawless” — written by Nick Cave — is based on a true-story novel called “The Wettest County in the World,” by Matt Bondurant. The area in question is Franklin County, Va., and in 1931, when most of the action in the film takes place, it was a bloody paradise of bootleggers. This picturesque corner of Appalachia has now provided a bonanza for dialect coaches and their charges, who set the hills alive with a symphony of dropped consonants and attenuated vowels almost as violent as the gunfire that periodically erupts.

At the center of the cacophony are the three Bondurant brothers, forebears of the author of “The Wettest County” and upholders of a stubborn mountain code of independence and honor. Forrest, the taciturn would-be patriarch, is played by Tom Hardy, who was born in London. Howard, his drunk and volatile enforcer, is played by the Australian actor Jason Clarke. The twitchy, weak-willed runt of the litter, Jack, is our own Shia LaBeouf.

Each actor takes a different approach to the demands of a tricky regional accent, which stretches the already thin credibility of the idea that they might be kin. Mr. Clarke does a bit of howling but not much chatting. Mr. LaBeouf, as is his custom, runs his mouth in as many directions as possible, while Mr. Hardy mostly grunts, growls and ribbits, occasionally interrupting his angry bullfrog impersonation to deliver down-home bromides that make him sound like Toby

Keith choking on a Cheeto.

Not that the movie, a carnival of mayhem and period detail — visually suggesting Walker Evans, “Bonnie and Clyde,” “Miller’s Crossing” and “The Beverly Hillbillies” — exactly insists on realism. Nor, in spite of gruesome killings and boisterous car chases, does it hew to the conventions of the period gangster genre. It is, instead, a sprawling evocation of a vaguely rendered time and place, as crowded as an episode of “Hee Haw” and occasionally as much fun.

Life in Franklin County is brutal and complicated, especially when a Chicago lawman named Rakes (Guy Pearce), a sadist with slicked-down hair, chalk-striped suits and remarkable diction, starts to muscle in on the local moonshine action. When the Bondurants refuse to play by his rules — preferring to deal directly with a mob boss (Gary Oldman) — a nasty little war breaks out. Faces are pummeled; throats are cut; and shotguns, hunting knives and brass knuckles are put to grisly use.

To soften the mood a bit, there are inklings of romance (and flashes of bared skin) between Forrest and Maggie (Jessica Chastain), a redhead who shows up one day, in flight from the corruptions of the big city, to take a job pouring coffee in the cafe that serves as the Bondurants’ headquarters.

Jack, meanwhile, courts Bertha (Mia Wasikowska), the daughter of a local preacher. As he and his brothers expand their business — with the help of their frail young neighbor, Cricket (Dane DeHaan) — Jack develops a taste for flashy clothes and cars, affecting Cagneyesque mannerisms, even though he is not nearly as tough as Forrest or Howard.

And “Lawless” seems unsure of just how tough it wants to be, bouncing between rollicking backwoods humor and graphic violence, with a dollop of good-old-boys sentimentality thrown in for good measure. It has neither the stripped-down intensity of “The Proposition,” Mr. Hillcoat and Mr. Cave’s 2006 outback western, nor the lyrical austerity of “The Road,” Mr. Hillcoat’s not bad 2009 adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s postapocalyptic parable.

There are too many action-movie clichés without enough dramatic purpose, and interesting themes and anecdotes are scattered around without being fully

explored. This is weak and cloudy moonshine: it doesn't burn or intoxicate.

“Lawless” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). Swearin’, killin’, gittin’ nekkid.

Lawless

Director John Hillcoat

Writer Nick Cave

Stars Tom Hardy, Shia LaBeouf, Guy Pearce

Rating R

Running Time 1h 56m

Genres Crime, Drama

Movie data powered by IMDb.com

Last updated: Mar 30, 2016

A version of this review appears in print on August 29, 2012, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Moonshine County That Is Stirred, Not Shaken.