

Eastwood resurrects western with 'Unforgiven'



JOHN MONAGHAN

TICKETS PLEASE
He may look like it when wrestling squealers, but Billy Munny is a cowboy with a dark past and a nasty reputation.

Legend has it that the outlaw-turned-pig farmer once shot his way out of a showdown with three lawmen. During a drinking binge, he would gun a man down over the slightest provocation.

In "Unforgiven," Munny, now a widower who's seen the error of his ways, wears years of sorrow beneath Clint Eastwood's trademark squint. His final brush with wickedness leads to the best western Eastwood (or anyone) has made in years.

On the surface, "Unforgiven" has all the elements of a standard horse opera. Munny, his old partner and an eager young gunslinger ride off to collect the bounty offered by prostitutes who want dead the man who scarred the face of one of their girls.

Look deeper and you'll find a heavy moral exercise in Western justice. What is proper punishment for cutting up a woman? Is \$1,000 enough justification for taking any one's life? How many must die to avenge the loss of your best friend?

Gene Hackman has a great character role as Little Bill Daggett, the sheriff who's not at all thrilled about bounty hunters descending on his town. He requires every man to surrender his guns before entering his jurisdiction.

English Bob, played with hammy

theatricality by Richard Harris, tests local law when he blows in, spouting off about the English monarchy and packing a six-shooter. Little Bill, who knew the flamboyant assassin previously, personally kicks the stuffing out of Bob before riding him out of town on a rail.

You spend the next 20 minutes anticipating the confrontation between Little Bill and Munny. Their "ing takes some truly fateful twists that make even murkier the definition of western hero.

For his part, Eastwood paints a vivid and understated portrait of a man just one drink away from sinking back into the meanness he has worked so hard to overcome. It's light years ahead of his Shane redux in the aptly titled "Pale Rider."

And like any Eastwood picture, there are plenty of quotable lines, especially the introspective ones about taking a man's life: "The only thing he's got; the only thing he'll ever have."

As a director, he has the sense to steer clear of the visual tricks used by the strong directors (Sergio Leone, Don Siegel) he's worked in the past. He and cinematographer Jack Green have a clever way of mixing Technicolor hues with the kind of shadows too rarely used during the golden age of Hollywood westerns.

While it may not have the emotional punch of the classic western, "Unforgiven" has little to apologize for. It proves again that Clint Eastwood is the only man alive who can keep breathing life into the traditional western.



A quick lesson: Gene Hackman gives Clint Eastwood some instructions in frontier law in "Unforgiven."

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