Film Review: Visceral ‘On the Road’ Honors a Great American Novel

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on March 23, 2013 - 7:06am

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CHICAGO – The 1957 novel “On the Road” by Jack Kerouac, was a missile across the bow of American social conventions, and a precursor to the radical 1960s. For over fifty years, it has eluded a film adaptation, until director Walter Salles (“The Motorcycle Diaries”) found the way to capture it.



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

It is a reverential depiction, with all the familiar characters from the novel springing to life. And that is the key word here…life. This adaptation is life itself, which is what the novel embraces. Somehow, by just indulging in the characters and their lifeblood, Walter Salles – in partnership with his screenwriter Jose Rivera – was able to understand what makes this story tick. It is about youth, discovery and the consequences regarding all of that. It is about the relationship between two kindred souls, not part of a lost generation, but part of everything that is discovered when challenging the society they are born into. Kerouac and his merry band of fellow travelers unearthed a new way of being, and helped to launch a new era. Somehow, by expressing that theme within the film, Salles was able to coral the lightning in a literary bottle, and make us understand that in a short life, there are only a few moments to take advantage of youth.

This is a road picture, as the title implies. Sal Paradise (Sam Riley) meets his muse Dean Moriarty (Garrett Henlund), soon after his father dies. Dean likes to expand his boundaries, and draws fellow revelers into his radar, including his young wife Mary Lou (Kristen Stewart) and the poet Carlo Marx (Tom Sturridge). Sal and Dean set out to discover America, or at least the America behind the restrictive air of the post World War II conformity and paranoia.

In their travels, they come upon Old Bull Lee (Viggo Mortensen) and his wife Jane (Amy Adams), Ed and Galatea Dunkel (Danny Morgan and Elizabeth Moss) and Camille (Kirsten Dunst). Camille becomes Dean’s second wife (while he is still married to Mary Lou), and has his child. Sal’s adventures with Dean and his myriad of relationships inspire the chronicle on the road, and in becoming his own brand of adult through their relationship he will go on to inspire generations to come.

“On the Road” continues its limited release in Chicago on March 22nd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Sam Riley, Garrett Hedlund, Kristen Stewart, Amy Adams, Elisabeth Moss, Kirsten Dunst and Viggo Mortensen. Adapted by Jose Rivera, based on the novel by Jack Kerouac. Directed by Walter Salles. Rated “R”

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Sal (Sam Riley, left) and Dean (Garrett Hedlund) are ‘On the Road’
Photo credit: IFC Films

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