

‘Blackthorn’ Offers Wistful Rethinking of Butch Cassidy Legend

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on October 14, 2011 - 7:16am

- [Blackthorn](#) [2]
- [Butch Cassidy](#) [3]
- [Eduardo Noriega](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Magnolia Pictures](#) [6]
- [Mateo Gil](#) [7]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [8]
- [Movie Review](#) [9]
- [Sam Shepard](#) [10]
- [The Sundance Kid](#) [11]



Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Western buffs have often criticized George Roy Hill’s 1969 classic, “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,” for romanticizing its subject matter to the point where it felt less concerned about its titular criminals and more interested in the friendship between stars Paul Newman and Robert Redford. Yet for all of the charm in William Goldman’s script, there was an underlying darkness and tragic poignance that allowed the final act to pack an unforgettable punch.

Moviegoers seeking similar thrills from “Blackthorn” will be sorely disappointed. It’s an unremarkable low-key rethinking of the Butch Cassidy legend, devoid of the whimsy and excitement that made the Newman/Redford film such a kick. Though it certainly isn’t an embarrassing misfire like 1979’s regrettable “Butch and Sundance: The Early Years,” it fails in its aspirations to leave an equally iconic imprint of the oft-mythologized tale. It mainly serves as an Oscar baiting showcase for star Sam Shepard, who’s fine but hardly in Jeff Bridges territory.

Miguel Barros’ script bases its premise off the conceit that Butch and Sundance’s death in the 1908 Bolivian standoff was based on unsubstantiated evidence. The film opens 19 years later, as the exiled Cassidy (living under the alias of James Blackthorn) is whiling away his days in silence and seclusion. His Bolivian housekeeper, Yana (Magaly Solier), is the sole bright spot of his weary days, as he composes letters to the son he’s never seen, and perhaps never will. Flashbacks to the immortal escapades of Cassidy and his deceased friend Sundance fail to capture the chemistry and brotherhood that made these men such memorable larger-than-life figures. These scenes also leave no shadow of a doubt that Etta Place fancied Butch over Sundance, and on the basis of the Kid’s thick-headed portrayal, it’s easy to understand why. We get no sense of why anyone would follow Sundance to the ends of the earth, let alone Bolivia. This may seem like a minor plot detail in the grand scheme of “Blackthorn,” but it sticks out like a sore thumb to anyone familiar with Hill’s indelible portrayal of the beloved characters. It’s difficult to imagine many moviegoers yearning to see Cassidy grow up to be a grumpy old codger rather than go out in a blaze of glory.



Sam Shepard stars in Mateo Gil’s Blackthorn.

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Morality tales have long been the specialty of filmmaker Mateo Gil, who has forged several triumphant collaborations with Alejandro Amenábar ("Abre los ojos," "The Sea Inside," "Agora"). The western genre would appear to be a perfect match for Gil's sensibilities, but he seems curiously out of his element. Despite the arresting shots of painterly expanses lensed by veteran cinematographer Juan Ruiz Anchia ("House of Games"), there's little sense of a lived-in atmosphere. Everything looks too polished and picturesque, while the characters fit snugly into familiar Eastwoodian archetypes. In many ways, "Blackthorn" is just as idealized a character portrait as Hill's film. It's nearly impossible to generate suspense over whether Cassidy will take the moral high ground during a conflict, since Shepard plays him as a man of straightforward decency who warmly chuckles about his past antics as if they were instances of youthful stupidity. It's a shame Gil didn't pen the script, since Barros' pedestrian dialogue lacks any sense of subtlety. Characters make blunt statements as if they were reading off the script outline: "My future ran off with that horse" and "I've been my own man—nothing richer than that."

When Cassidy decides to make his long-delayed return to America, it's not long before the film turns into a lead-footed retread of Goldman's script. After taking pity on a scrappy young outlaw, Eduardo (well played Eduardo Noriega), Cassidy allows him to tag along. Together, they evade the capture of his foes, who travel on horseback and leave a sinister dust cloud in their wake (one can almost hear Newman asking, "Who are those guys?"). The generational and cultural barriers between the circumstantial partners lead to some predictable banter that never catches fire. Only in the final act does the film build up some sizable dramatic momentum, as Gil allows the moral certitude of a key decision to clash with its emotional repercussions. The glimmers of newfound adrenaline that grace Shepard's weathered features are a joy to behold, and the picture springs to life whenever Cassidy croons melancholy tunes that echo through the canyons (perhaps Shepard will snag a role in "Crazy Heart 2: Weary and Wearier").



Eduardo Noriega stars in Mateo Gil's *Blackthorn*.

Photo credit: *Magnolia Pictures*

The most artful and gripping sequence in the picture achieves a grandeur all its own. It occurs after Cassidy and Eduardo decide to split off in the blinding sands of a salt desert as their enemies grow closer. Each rider is reduced to an indistinguishable spec on the horizon, much like Omar Sharif in "Lawrence of Arabia," as the menacing silence proves to be as excruciating as the extreme heat. It's the sort of sequence that could only be appreciated in its entirety on the big screen, yet it's unfortunately confined within a picture that's not quite worth the price of admission. When characters toss the corpses of their would-be assassins into nearby waters, it's impossible to not be immediately reminded of Newman and Redford's marvelous ride through the rapids. Despite its obvious desire to distance itself from Hill's film, "Blackthorn" will be remembered as little more than a needless end coda to one of the most beloved entertainments in cinema history. But since Gil and Barros have tacked on a thoroughly unsatisfying anti-conclusion to the picture, it has opened the doors for a possible "Blackthorn Vol. 2" in the near future. Count me out.

'Blackthorn' stars Sam Shepard, Eduardo Noriega, Stephen Rea, Magaly Solier, Dominique McElligott, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau and Padraic Delaney. It was written by Miguel Barros and directed by Mateo Gil. It opened Oct. 14 at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.



[12]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [12]

Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 19 2024 - 7:31pm*):

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/16034/blackthorn-offers-wistful-rethinking-of-butch-cassidy-legend>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/mattmovieman>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/blackthorn>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/butch-cassidy>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/eduardo-noriega>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/magnolia-pictures>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/mateo-gil>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/matt-fagerholm>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/sam-shepard>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/the-sundance-kid>
- [12] <mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#MATT>