

Oliver Stone's 'Savages' Harpoons Drug War Absurdities

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Director Oliver Stone sees a controversy, and comments on a controversy, in his own distinctive cinematic style. The new film “Savages” is no exception, taking on the U.S./Mexican marijuana wars, with performances by Blake Lively, Taylor Kitsch, Aaron Johnson, Salma Hayek and John Travolta.

The story of intrigue and kidnapping in the marijuana trade is the surface story, underneath is Stone's statement on how much energy, law enforcement resources and lives are used up trying to keep a product that people want out of their hands. The endgame on pot prohibition is coming – as John Travolta's DEA character points out – but before that underground money stream is cut off, people will be tortured, shot, blown up and psychologically ruined, all in the ironic pursuit of providing an outlook altering and wholly available buzz.

Chon (Taylor Kitsch), Ben (Aaron Johnson) and Ophelia (Blake Lively) are living the pure California dream. Their luxurious beachfront home sports all the amenities three twentysomething life drifters could possibly desire. Chon is ex-military, having done tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and his travels there determined his stateside business – the production of potent marijuana. Ben is the botanist, discovering [a pot strain](#) [14] that is high on the high, and their in-demand product becomes the best in California. Ophelia is part of the reward, a rich girl escaping her trappings to love both men.



The High Life: Taylor Kitsch (Chon), Blake Lively (Ophelia) and Aaron Johnson (Ben) in 'Savages'
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

One of the largest Mexican pot cartels, led by the mysterious Elena (Salma Hayek), wants a piece of the California action, and threatens Chon and Ben to essentially give them part of the business. The two growers refuse, so the cartel kidnaps their precious Ophelia to convince them otherwise. This now becomes a rescue mission, involving Elena's ruthless enforcer named Lado (Benicio Del Toro) and a hapless Drug Enforcement Agent named Dennis (John Travolta). The war is on, one that no one can win.

This film is creates some obvious symbols – the castrated government represented by Travolta on one side and the evil queen of the cartels with Hayek's character on the other. It is almost a standard story about the war between these types of underground money-makers and is highly exaggerated – the California paradise and the "Queen's Lair" are excesses that could be in a Chuck Norris chop-socky flick. The young pot growers are underplayed by Kitsch and Johnson, they are fantasies of the American Dream, if the dream were clouded by pot smoke. They are in too deep, but won't back down, which facilitates the intrigue within that standard narrative.

Blake Lively ("Gossip Girl") is starting to make a name for herself, and plays the perfect California girl with a dreamy quality. Her character goes through the most torture, and in her captivity there are nice psychological shadings that she expresses perfectly. Salma Hayek kicks her persona into a new realm, turning what could have been a '60s-era Batman villain into a complex bundle of anxiety. John Travolta gets a few great scenes as the fast talking DEA man, tortured himself by the corruption of money.

The script (co-written by Oliver Stone with Shane Salerno and Don Winslow) has many weird qualities to it. On one hand it gives Travolta some highly clever dialogue, delivered at the rapid pace of a screwball comedy, and on the other there is the flat lines (and line readings) of the California threesome, which tangle with cliché territory. It's as if the film goes in and out from the action/adventure of kidnap rescue to the deeper realm of subtle satire. Nothing is what it seems, for marijuana growth and profit creates an Oz of its own.



Salma Hayek (Elena) and Blake Lively Break Bread in 'Savages'
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

The U.S. military plays another interesting role. Chon is a tough-guy veteran, of the type Americans worship in their troop-loving minds. But how does he use the skills he acquired through the folly of our wars? By procuring high grade pot seeds and planning triangulated attack methods on the other cartels. In fact, each of the sides have their own militias, armed to the teeth with the latest technology. It's a drug war, all right, complete with night vision goggles and Apple computers as the latest weapons.

Leave it to Oliver Stone to continue his quest to expose hypocrisy. When the head of the federal "justice" department – and their various Patriot Act bureaucrats – watch this representation of a lost war, they may be inspired to lay down their arms and fire up the bowl.

"Savages" opens everywhere on July 6th. Featuring Blake Lively, Taylor Kitsch, Aaron Johnson, Benicio Del Toro, Salma Hayek and John Travolta. Screenplay by Shane Salerno, Don Winslow and Oliver Stone. Directed by Oliver Stone. Rated "R"



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