

## Tom Hardy Leads Great Cast in Disappointing ‘Lawless’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 29, 2012 - 10:35am

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Rating: **1.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – John Hillcoat’s “Lawless,” based on Matt Bondurant’s “The Wettest County in the World,” is one of the most high profile disappointments of 2012, a film with an amazing cast that suffocates under the weight of an inconsistent script, a boring lead, and a complete lack of narrative drive. Who would have ever guessed that a movie with so many charismatic actors and actresses could ever be so shockingly dull? It’s nearly an accomplishment.

Tom Hardy, Gary Oldman, Guy Pearce, Jessica Chastain, Mia Wasikowska – any one of these wonderful actors typically makes a film better and one could easily assume that having all five of them in one ensemble would lead to dramatic gold. And yet even this level of acting talent can’t save “Lawless.” None of them do anything particularly wrong (although Pearce makes some odd choices) but they can’t save a haphazard script that doesn’t understand basic requirements of storytelling such as presenting the viewer with consistent characters instead of mere cliché. We’ve seen “Lawless” done before and done significantly better. Even with the A-list cast, it’s little more than forgettable.



Lawless

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

It’s 1931 in Franklin County, Virginia, known in some circles as “The Wettest County in the World” due to its abundance of illegal alcohol

operations at the height of Prohibition. Crooked cops are paid to look the other way as families of bootleggers keep their families fed by getting other ones drunk. An important figurehead of this community is Forrest Bondurant (a mumbling-but-charismatic Tom Hardy), who rises to moonshine prominence with his brothers – Howard (Jason Clarke) and Jack (Shia LaBeouf). Jack may seem the least interesting of the three as he’s the youngest and so the one often in need of rescue but he’s made the narrator here in one of many storytelling mistakes we’ll get to later.

Jack works to gain the respect of his older brothers and become as important a Bondurant as his more famous siblings. He works with a friend named Cricket (Dane DeHaan) who might as well be wearing a “Star Trek” red shirt and be named “Inevitable Victim” and he woos a local church-going girl named Bertha (Mia Wasikowska). While Jack is coming-of-age, times are getting more dangerous in Franklin County thanks to the arrival of Special Deputy Charley Rakes (Guy Pearce), a unique character sent from Chicago to clean things up. Meanwhile, notorious gangster Floyd Banner (Gary Oldman) crosses paths with the Bondurants and Forrest falls in love with the lovely new barmaid Maggie (Jessica Chastain).



Lawless

*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

If it sounds like a cluttered, inconsistent screenplay, you have no idea just how unfocused this mess can be. First, it never should have been Jack’s story. Forrest is a more interesting character by far or there should have been an attempt to tell all three brother’s stories. Instead, we see the activity through the least interesting character in the action. It’s unclear if Nick Cave’s script got muddled when a star like LaBeouf was cast as the lead but it feels like his work is being pulled between the ensemble piece that it should have been and a star vehicle for the “Transformers” star.

Even after getting past the misguided focus in terms of character, “Lawless” is a mess on a plot level as well. Hillcoat’s film jumps around from love scenes to local politics to bloody shoot-outs and there are times where it feels like you’re watching a much longer film with missing scenes. Gary Oldman pops up, chews some scenery, and disappears for most of the movie. LaBeouf and Wasikowska have absolutely no chemistry as potential suitors (but it’s hard to blame the actors because nearly everything in “Lawless” feels surface level) in poorly written courting scenes. And we never get to know poor Howard, a brother who seems to be little more than set dressing. Overall, there’s no heat, no passion, no honest danger and that’s even with typically scathing actors like Hardy and Chastain doing their absolute best (the only worthwhile scenes in the movie involve one or the both of them...it’s disaster when left to LaBeouf.)

To be fair, the production values in “Lawless” are strong. The film looks good in terms of costume design, art direction, etc. The fatal flaw here has nothing to do with the technical elements. It’s much simpler than that – there’s just no reason to care. It’s as if no one asked the important questions about “Lawless” – What story are we trying to tell? Why should we care about the Bondurant family? Whose story is this? By never digging into the true story of the Bondurants, John Hillcoat never found the depth on a character level that was simply required for his film to work. “Lawless” is remarkable proof that you can have the most notable cast of the year but it means nothing if you don’t give them something notable to do.

*“Lawless” stars Tom Hardy, Shia LaBeouf, Jason Clarke, Guy Pearce, Jessica Chastain, Mia Wasikowska, and Dane DeHaan. It was written by Nick Cave and directed by John Hillcoat. It is rated R and opens on August 29, 2012.*





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Content Director  
HollywoodChicago.com  
[brian@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:brian@hollywoodchicago.com) [15]

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