

Mesmerizing, Romantic Power of ‘Ain’t Them Bodies Saints’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 29, 2013 - 4:48pm

- [Ain't Them Bodies Saints](#) [2]
- [Ben Foster](#) [3]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [4]
- [Casey Affleck](#) [5]
- [David Lowery](#) [6]
- [Film Review](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Rooney Mara](#) [9]
- [Terrence Malick](#) [10]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Is a film automatically flawed if we can see its influences? We don’t do it as quickly in music, in which it’s often incredibly easy to determine a new artist’s favorite bands as a kid. Authors that pull from a notable and recognizable literary history are often lauded for doing so. But critics and film goers are quick to slam a director if they can pick out his inspirations. Does the fact that David Lowery’s “Ain’t Them Bodies Saints” feel so heavily inspired by Terrence Malick’s “Badlands” & “Days of Heaven” make it a lesser film? I don’t believe so. In fact, I think Lowery rises to the challenge of his mentor, making a film that doesn’t pale in comparison to the greats that influenced it but serves as a companion to them. When I saw “Saints” on a cold, early morning in Park City, I knew I was too tired to fully appreciate it, but it’s a film that truly grew on me on second viewing. It’s rich, mesmerizing, and remarkably technically accomplished, while also buoyed by three stellar central performances. Don’t miss this one.

Bob Muldoon (Casey Affleck) and Ruth Guthrie (Rooney Mara) – and what perfect names for a piece like this one – are fighting in the first scene of “Ain’t Them Bodies Saints.” Of course, they’re doing so across a perfectly-lit, sunrise-or-sunset-timed field, in period costumes, and with the kind of poetic grace that filmmakers often think everyone had decades before they were born. Immediately, “Saints” sets its style. It’s heightened realism. The costumes and faces are dirty but it’s oh such a beautiful layer of dirt.



Ain't Them Bodies Saints

Photo credit: IFC Films

It’s not long before these beautiful people are separated. They’re caught in a shootout, Bob is taken away, and Ruth is left to give birth to their new child on her own. Years pass. When Bob hears his daughter has been born, he escapes his confinement and heads on a road trip to meet her, not knowing that one of the police officers involved in his capture, Patrick Wheeler (Ben Foster), has grown closer to Ruth and his daughter.

While the poster and opening scenes may set up “Ain’t Them Bodies Saints” as a romance, Affleck and Mara are separated for most of the film. It is a film about the past slowly creeping up on the present. We are meant to question whether or not Bob should be successful; whether or not we’re supposed to even root for him to do so. Perhaps Ruth would be better off with a kinder soul like Patrick.

Lowery allows us to ask these questions because he doesn’t present his story with an overly underlined narrative arc. This is not a story of law-crossed lovers meant to run off into the sunset together. It’s more poem than prose. It’s a film that devotes long chunks to scenes that seemingly have no impact on the plot, such as the time that Rob spends in a seedy bar, but it all weaves into the fabric of the mood of the piece. Bradford Young’s (“Middle of Nowhere”) gorgeous, sun-kissed, naturally-lit cinematography has a spellbinding effect, heightened by a fantastic score from Daniel Hart.



Ain't Them Bodies Saints
Photo credit: IFC Films

As for performance, Affleck gets his best part in years, allowed to display the range and charisma that he showed in his breakthrough work in “The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford.” Mara’s role feels somewhat underwritten but, as usual, she does a lot with very little. She’s a subtle actress who can do more with a look of longing than most of her peers can do with an entire script. And Ben Foster matches the two of them with a stellar piece of work, grounding the film in a relatable realism that could have been lacking if the film was only the story of Bob and Ruth.

Sometimes the lack of narrative thrust can be a bit overwhelming. Don’t watch “Ain’t Them Bodies Saints” without your daily dose of caffeine. But it’s the kind of film that lingers in memory like a song. Images float back, the score repeats, the character are memorable. Even if one doesn’t take it as a true success on its own terms, it is undeniably the work of a filmmaker who has made a statement with his first film. And, no, that statement is not that he likes Terrence Malick. It’s that he deserves comparison to him.

“Ain’t Them Bodies Saints” stars Casey Affleck, Rooney Mara, and Ben Foster. It was written and directed by David Lowery. It opens in Chicago on August 30, 2013.



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 23 2024 - 9:52pm):

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[3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/ben-foster>

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