

Great Cast Can't Find Truth in False Plotting of 'Out of the Furnace'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 6, 2013 - 11:18am

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Rating: **1.5/5.0**

One overriding thought dominated my time with Scott Cooper's stunningly disappointing "Out of the Furnace" – I just don't care. When I wasn't picking apart the gigantic plot holes in the narrative, I was marveling at the overheated characters who have been crafted from cliché instead of the real world. This is macho storytelling, the kind of movie that thinks it's saying something about men who punch, drink, and hunt but lacks the realism to give its alpha-male story any weight. Only typically solid performances from a cast far-too-talented for this material give it any justification for existence.

Russell Baze (Christian Bale) is an old-fashioned good guy. He loves his girl Lena (Zoe Saldana), takes care of his dying father, and looks out for his soldier brother Rodney (Casey Affleck). Little bro is kind of a fuck-up, first seen at an OTB, just so we know before any other character development that he has a bit of a dark side. He gambles, he mopes, he battles the demons of PTSD, and he owes fight coordinator John Petty (Willem Dafoe) some serious cash.



Out of the Furnace

Photo credit: *Relativity Media*

Despite Affleck's best efforts, Rodney is merely a plot device – a way to link our hero Russell with our villain, the awful Harlan DeGroat (Woody Harrelson). The snarling, spitting Harlan is the much-darker criminal cousin of Petty. While Petty operates out of the back of a bar and seems to be a relatively reputable businessman, Harlan is introduced shoving a hot dog down a woman's throat before pummeling the bystander who intervenes at a drive-in showing of "The Midnight Meat Train." Harlan runs his own fight club in the back woods between the Baze's Pennsylvania mill town and Jersey. Harlan's corner of the world looks dark enough that if someone dies in one of his fights, they probably just throw the body in a mass grave. It's not a place for the weak.

The problem is that Petty owes Harlan money. Rodney owes Petty money. You see where this going. On the urging of the young fighter to clear his debt, Petty reluctantly takes Rodney to the dark side of bare-knuckle brawling and orders him to throw a fight. When things go predictably awfully, Russell has to enact justice himself. Forest Whitaker pops up to do a "Christian Bale as Batman" impression as a gravelly-voiced local cop who not only tries to save Russell from breaking the law but happens to now be with the man's ex-girlfriend. And that's indicative of the first of many problems with "Out of the Furnace." Whitaker can't just be a cop. He's the cop with Russell's ex. Russell can't just be an average blue-collar guy. He has to do a stint in jail after a horrendous drunk-driving accident. Rodney can't just be a fighter. He has to be deep in PTSD as well. Every character gets not one cliché, not two, but several.



Out of the Furnace

Photo credit: Relativity Media

I didn't buy it for a second. Cooper and co-writer Brad Ingelsby push and pull their characters into increasingly unbelievable situations that feel designed to fit a lackluster plot more than anything realistic. Russell & Rodney make decisions in "Out of the Furnace" that simply don't make sense. Petty watches Rodney refuse to throw a fight, and then, a few short scenes later, takes him to another fight and tells him to throw it. And Russell's end game simply doesn't feel genuine. The cinematic tricks that Cooper employs in an attempt to add weight to the clichéd storytelling – such as intercutting a fight scene with shots of Russell and family friend Red (Sam Shepard) hunting & gutting a deer – feel false. They are attempts to add Iron John gravity to a story that doesn't have the weight of truth.

It's not without some notable efforts on the part of the cast. Bale gives a very subtle performance, especially when compared to his more scene-stealing work in the vastly superior "American Hustle," and Affleck and Dafoe are rarely bad. Harrelson gets the scenery-chewing part and he is up to the challenge, exuding menace from his first shot. I also liked a lot of the minor players like Shepard and character actor Tom Bower, who give the edges of the piece the realism lacking at its center.

While the cast will walk away from "Out of the Furnace" clean, it's ultimately an effort that wasn't worth their time. Alpha male sagas of crime and vengeance are as common as 3D animated sequels and yet few have felt as thematically thin or unrealistic as this effort. Pick another one instead.

"Out of the Furnace" stars Christian Bale, Casey Affleck, Woody Harrelson, Zoe Saldana, Forest Whitaker, Sam Shepard, and Willem Dafoe. It was written by Brad Ingelsby & Scott Cooper and directed by Cooper. It opens in theaters nationwide on December 6, 2013.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [14]

Content Director

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