

## ‘A Million Ways to Die in the West’ Suffers Because Seth MacFarlane Casts Himself

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – A feature-length comedy is a daunting undertaking. But being *consistently* funny for 2 straight hours is like climbing Mount Everest blindfolded with no arms while taking selfies using your feet.

Special effects mean nothing in the land of comedy. It’s all about the writing and the acting (in that order). To give you a sense of who you’re working with here, I find “Anchorman” hilarious and “Burn After Reading” for a dark comedy. Seth MacFarlane’s “Ted” hits more than it misses, but his return accomplishes the reverse with “A Million Ways to Die in the West” without a reason for being.



Seth MacFarlane directs, produces, co-writes and stars in “A Million Ways to Die in the West”.

Photo credit: Lorey Sebastian, Universal Pictures

Double entendres like “That’s horseshit!” (referring to intentionally placed manure in the middle of a statement of disdain) fall flat while a game at the fair called “Runaway Slave” is genuinely funny (and finds a way for a recently *unchained* man to appear for a perfect post-credits cameo). Likewise, it works when MacFarlane gives yet another ode to Mila Kunis (who appears in “Ted” and voices Meg in his “Family Guy”). When speaking Apache, MacFarlane’s character says “Mi La Ku Nis, Mi La Ku Nis” and the subtitles say “fine, fine”.

Cameos in general are well used and patiently placed in this film, but the biggest problem with it is Seth MacFarlane’s inability to see that he shouldn’t have been the star. He holds the film’s lead actor, Albert, back. While he valiantly attempts the self-deprecating role of a sheep



farmer, he'd have been better solely as the writer, director and a supporting actor rather than the guy with the most screen time.

His love interest, Amanda Seyfried as Louise, is painfully cast as the worst choice in this film. She's never appreciated on camera, barely has anything to say and is wasted whenever the camera pans to her or a mic picks up whatever comes out of her mouth. Her character is terribly predictable: pretty girl is with the good guy, switches to arrogant jerk and then wants the good guy back after he's become our hero.



Charlize Theron as Anna in "A Million Ways to Die in the West".

*Photo credit: Universal Pictures*

Surprisingly, even Neil Patrick Harris is both hit *and* miss. Playing his usual overdramatic and theatrical role, we love him in his moustache song but he's annoying most of the rest of the time (intentionally so, but not lovably so). Liam Neeson is the man you're supposed to love to hate (Cinch Leatherwood instead of Clint Eastwood). He's fine, but certainly not in his "Taken" glory.

Giovanni Ribisi as Edward and Sarah Silverman as Ruth, on the other hand, are an absolute pleasure. While it's no surprise that Ruth is the town's whore and she shacks up with 10 men (on a slow day), she never sleeps with her Christian boyfriend because they're saving themselves for marriage. Their innocence as a couple plays perfect irony against her vulgarity as a prostitute.

What I'm most surprised about is who I feel is the star of this film. Following a genius role in "Monster," a bomb in "Æon Flux" and lots of middle-of-the-road successes and failures in between, "A Million Ways to Die in the West" is led by Charlize Theron as Anna. Anna has been married to our villain, Clinch, since the ridiculous age of 9. She talks back, but ultimately he's got her by the girdle.





Sarah Silverman as Ruth and Giovanni Ribisi as Edward are caught in the act in “A Million Ways to Die in the West”.

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

Simply wanting to be treated well and to actually fall in love, she meets our “star,” Albert, and teaches him how to shoot, to build confidence, to stand up for himself, to be a man and how to be loved in return. All the while, she finds a way to be interesting, beautiful, funny, sincere, flawed, apologetic and redeeming. It’s unusual for me to appreciate such a character, but Theron is able to take only lukewarm material from MacFarlane and turn it into country-western gold.

What’s perhaps most surprising about MacFarlane’s “R”-rated script is how relatively unshocking it is. When you’ve elected to cut your profits by pushing out the “PG-13” and below crowd to go for “Django Unchained” glory, I expected much more shock and awe. MacFarlane wrote a novelization of this movie (the first book in his career) based on the screenplay, but the result feels like it just needs to be dirtier.

MacFarlane at the helm of “A Million Ways to Die in the West” is only a fraction of the writer and director that Quentin Tarantino is and he’s less than a fraction of the actor that Jamie Foxx was as the lead character of Django. Tarantino made the much more prudent choice to take himself off camera (aside from a very small role) and focus his time on the critical role of directing and writing where he could excel the most.



Amanda Seyfried as Louise and Neil Patrick Harris as Foy attend the fair in “A Million Ways to Die in the West”.

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

MacFarlane should have made the same choice – casting someone else in the lead role – and teaming up fresher blood than Alex Sulkin and Wellesley Wild as his co-writers.

This film feels like an inside joke between this trio of goofy boys, and ironically, that’s exactly what it is. Together, they found it funny how easily and how many ways you could die in the west. So, they set out to craft a comedy showing all the ways how. If you want to know exactly how many ways there are to die in the west – at least according to MacFarlane – it turns out that his body count is only 15.

Unsurprisingly, Sulkin and Wild joined MacFarlane in writing TV’s “Family Guy” and “Ted” and they’re both returning with MacFarlane to help write “Ted 2” in 2015. MacFarlane should have teamed up with someone like Robert Rodriguez to bring a dirtier, edgier and grittier feel to the wild wild west. With a \$40 million production budget, the film has only earned \$6.1 million in its first day of release to 3,158 domestic theatres.

Tarantino nailed it just 1.5 years ago with the 165-minute “Django Unchained”. By contrast, “A Million Ways to Die in the West” is a too-long, 116-minute attempted copycat – messily comprised of some comedic hits but more misses – that we just didn’t need.

*“A Million Ways to Die in the West” stars Seth MacFarlane, Charlize Theron, Liam Neeson, Amanda Seyfried, Neil Patrick Harris, Giovanni Ribisi and Sarah Silverman with moments of Christopher Lloyd, Gilbert Gottfried and Ewan McGregor from writer and director Seth MacFarlane and writers Alec Sulkin and Wellesley Wild. The film, which opened on May 30, 2014, has a running time of 116 minutes. It is rated “R” for strong crude and sexual content, language throughout, some violence and drug material.*



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