

'The Rider': Film Review | Cannes 2017

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A lovely and desolate modern Western. TWITTER

Chloe Zhao's second feature, premiering in the Directors' Fortnight sidebar, revolves around a young cowboy who sustains a consequential head injury.

The Rider is a rare gem, a small, acutely observed portrait of a few lives on what used to be the frontier but is now a desolate backwater, the windswept badlands around Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Focusing on a young cowboy whose promising future as a top rodeo rider is suddenly jeopardized by a dreadful head injury, this spare and intimate second feature by Chloe Zhao beautifully captures the way a handful of people stoically deal with the

meager hands life has dealt them. Commercial prospects are naturally quite modest, but the film will definitely gather a robust core of support from festival audiences and viewers happy to turn off the main highway and onto the back roads in search of good work.

The flavor of the Old West permeates every aspect of this quiet, sensitive piece, and the people in it live lives very similar to those they would have lived in generations past, save for the weed and cellphones. At the center of it is Brady Blackburn (Brady Jandreau), who when first seen evokes Frankenstein with his stapled-together scalp wound, the result of a recent severe injury in which a rodeo horse stomped on his skull.

Rodeo and horse training have always been, and promised to remain, Brady's life, and the doctors' edict that he's got to give it all up is tough to take. Not just that, but his immediate circle counts on him for everything; good-natured sister Lilly (Lilly Jandreau) has limited capacities, while best pal Lane (Lane Scott) suffers from disabilities that would seem to indicate a lifetime of institutional care. Dad (Tim Jandreau) is a tough guy more prone to man-up-style challenges than help or concern. Mom is dead.

Working in a style that one might call lyrical realism, Zhao, whose first feature *Songs My Brother Taught Me* focused on the Lakota Sioux in the same neighborhood and stirred favorable reactions at Sundance two years ago, brings a few other characters into the mix, just enough to indicate how limited the locals' prospects are. The old cowboy ethic still prevails, but its tenets seem far less applicable to modern life than they did even in *The Last Picture Show* several decades back, and the evidence is everywhere to be seen that there's little in these parts to sustain a secure life or suggest anything better in the future.

This sensitively limned subtext quietly informs the foreground action that is always dominated by Brady's inner turmoil; his uncertainty lies at the heart of the matter here but is never turned into melodrama just to induce crisis or tension. While his condition remains manifestly impaired — his right hand

has become so gnarled that he is constantly obliged to pry his fingers out of a curl — Brady is forced to admit the truth about his condition. But as he slowly improves, you can essentially read his mind as he begins weighing the idea of taking the risk versus living a life that precludes the possibility of climbing back on a horse and competing again.

The film's elegiac style and admiration for stoic reserve, common traits in American cinema about the West in earlier days, could not be more out of step with the tenor and sensibilities of the moment, and more's the pity. But Zhao, a Chinese filmmaker who lives in Denver, has resurrected these venerable approaches with a natural, unaffected confidence that is bracing. The result is a beautiful, honest account of a tough way of life, one that produces and requires a strong sense of identity and values.

If all the characters here feel like the real deal, it is because they are; the Blackburn clan are played by real-life family members Brady, Tim and Lilly Jandreau. Zhao met Brady before his real-life accident and developed the story out of the aftermath.

Joshua James Richards' cinematography is splendidly lyrical, evocative and alive to every observed moment.

Production companies: Caviar, Highwayman Films

Cast: Brady Jandreau, Tim Jandreau, Lilly Jandreau, Lane Scott, Cat Clifford

Director-screenwriter: Chloe Zhao

Producers: Bert Hamelinck, Sacha Ben Harroche, Mollye Asher

Executive producers: Michael Sagol, Jasper Thomlinson, Chloe Zhao

Director of photography: Joshua James Richards

Editor: Alex O'Flinn

Music: Nathan Halpern

Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Directors' Fortnight)

104 minutes