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Navigating the Aftermath: A Conversation with David Lowery

Sophia Stein · Thursday, September 5th, 2013

Ain't Them Bodies Saints is a mesmerizing tone poem of a film from director David Lowery. His work has been compared stylistically, by almost every critic out there, to Terrence Malick's. The story concerns outlaw lovers, Bob Muldoon and Ruthie Guthrie (Casey Affleck and Rooney Mara), in the aftermath of a crime spree and a shooting that lands Bob in prison.

The film casts its plaintive spell with a hauntingly original score, spell-binding performances from Ben Foster and Keith Carradine — in addition to Affleck and Mara, and award-winning cinematography from Bradford Young “for the expressive use of...lighting to evoke the state of mind of the characters and the sense of time and place.”

This is the second feature film directed by Lowery, a self-educated filmmaker, who has earned his living to date as a film editor. His editing credits include *Upstream Color* and *Sun Don't Shine* for director Shane Carruth and Dustin Guy Defa's *Bad Fever*.

Lowery set-out to write an action film, but his inclinations steered him in another direction on *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*. “It's about archetypes who get worn down by time and turn into real people,” he describes. With *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, “I want [the audience] to feel like they've just heard an old folk song that they'd never heard before.”

Sophia Stein: This is an action film with quite possibly the most minimal action that I've ever seen. How did that come to pass?

David Lowery: I started out wanting to write a traditional action movie, and I kept finding myself far more interested in the aftermath of the action, than in the action itself. So I decided that instead of fighting that urge, I would just run with it. I explored those consequences, everything that might have happened off-screen, in the aftermath of the drama.

S2: You describe *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* as a story “about the doomed love of two American outlaws in the waning days of the West.” What do you mean by the ‘waning days of the West’?

DL: Some people would tell you that the West was over as soon as people stopped using horses to get around and the automobile took over the roads. Other people would say that the West is a state of mind. As the world becomes smaller, as we become able to communicate faster and more easily, and move around the world at a record-setting pace, there really is no longer a sense of frontier. The West was all about discovery. From the 1800's to sometime in the last century, there was that ability to define yourself with the land that you were setting out for and staking as your own. That was the origin of the Western genre. That's why the West became such an important ideal in our striving. This film is set in the 1970's, at a time when there is not much left in terms of uncharted landscape. The characters are all people who are trying to define themselves and make their own names in the world. Especially Bob, he is trying to plant his flag in American history, and he is


coming to the realization that, that train has passed, his days are over. That era has passed him by.

S2: You moved to Texas when you were eight years old, and you are presently based in Dallas. What does being a Texan connote to you?

DL: I hated Texas when I first moved there. I was annoyed by the idea people with big hats, riding horses. I thought that's what I was going to be getting myself into! The Texas I moved to, however, was completely different. It was a beautiful countryside – with hills and trees and grass and wonderful sky... So I grew to love the landscape fairly quickly. As I grew up, I learned about the spirit of independence in which Texans take pride. I liked the fact that you could fly the Texas flag at the same level as the United States flag; there is something very cheeky about that. As someone who has always tried to do things my own way, to establish myself on my own terms, and to make movies without the assistance of the existing infrastructure, that sort of rebelliousness appeals to me. I think that is why a lot of filmmakers live in Texas — because the state appeals to that independent and rebellious sensibility.

S2: Did the Bonnie and Clyde mythology figure prominently in your imagination growing up?

DL: I first became aware of that story when I moved to Dallas. Clyde is buried in Dallas, you can see where he grew up, and take a tour of all their local haunts. There is a lot of local pride in that Bonnie and Clyde mythology. But I think what really triggered my interest in the mythology more than anything else, to be honest, was Quentin Tarantino. When I was thirteen, *Pulp Fiction* blew my mind. Then I rented *Reservoir Dogs*. I heard that Tarantino wrote *True Romance*, which riffs on the Bonnie and Clyde mythology. I loved the soundtrack of that movie! And then I learned that the soundtrack to *True Romance* was actually the soundtrack to *Badlands* — so I gradually made my way, all the way back. Those movies had a big impact on me.

 **Ruth Guthrie (Rooney Mara) in “Ain’t Them Bodies Saints” Courtesy of The Independent Film Channel, LLC**

S2: You set this story in 1970’s, but the film has a real depression-era aesthetic. Do you feel that this moment in history is analogous to the depression?

DL: I think that American society is so different now than it was back then, that it is impossible for this time to be completely analogous to the 1930’s. Whatever economic depression we are experiencing now and whatever economic depression we might experience in the future, I think that people will respond to similar financial circumstances, in very different ways than they did back then.

S2: In the bar, Bob says: “I have a higher calling, a wife and a child...I used to be the devil. Now, I’m just a man.” Do you believe that parenting makes saints of us all?

DL: I don’t have children of my own, but I’m the oldest of nine kids. Seeing how my parents raised me and my siblings definitely had an impact on me. My youngest sister is thirteen, so as an adult, I have gotten to watch how they raised her and reflect back on how they raised me and my other siblings. They struggled a lot; they did what they could to make our lives as easy and as pain-free and pleasant, as possible. They put us before themselves, and that is something that I don’t take for granted. If I ever have children, I hope that I can do half the job that they did. So, the answer is — yes, I really do believe that parenting is one of the greatest things that a person can do.

S2: What does the title of your film, *Ain’t Them Bodies Saints*, mean to you?

DL: It means that everyone, no matter who they are or what they have done, has the potential to be

a good person. They have the potential to do the right thing. That is something intrinsic to every human being, I believe.

S2: Your screenplay was developed at the Sundance Institute. What did you have when you got started up there?

DL: I had a script, and I went in there thinking that it was in pretty good shape — but there were a few big issues that I was kind of ignoring. What happened when I got there was that I was told repeatedly (several times a day, by screenwriters that I greatly respect) that these problems did in fact exist, and that I needed to address them. There were several characters in the script who didn't really have a purpose — who were fumbling towards a purpose. There was a reason that I wanted them to be there, but I hadn't yet figured out what that was yet. For instance, Keith Carradine's character, Skerritt — he was sort-of this weird, bad-guy who was not really a bad-guy; he just hung around in the background. I had to decide what purpose I wanted for that character.

S2: We never actually learn the specifics of the relationship between Skerritt and Bob and Ruth. Why did you choose to withhold that information from the audience?

DL: As much as the movie is set in the past, I didn't want to dwell in the past. I wanted to start in media res, and to only reveal information that the characters would tell each other. I understand audiences who need that exposition, but in this case, I really felt that the fact that I was leaving all of that out, made the film stronger. The characters talk as if they already know one another. We are at a disadvantage because we don't know that history, but there is just enough there to orient us to what that relationship might be. You sense that the characters are richer than you can ever fully comprehend.

S2: You wrote this wonderful monologue for Bob – where he describes how he broke out of prison. What was your inspiration for that monologue?

DL: I wanted to hear someone mythologize themselves. Bob is someone who wants to go down in history. He wants to be famous, he wants to be remembered, and he wants to be remembered as better than he is. So he is going to tell these tall-tales about himself. That's just who he is — he is a spinner of yarns. I wanted to sit back at that moment in the movie and listen to someone tell a really great story.

S2: The acting performances in the film are spell-binding. Rooney Mara has this palpable heat coming off of her. How did you coax her performance, in particular?

DL: She came to set completely aware of who this character was and who she needed to be. All I really needed to do was guide her a little to the left, a little to the right, and try to get her to smile once in a while.

S2: The score and sound mixing are evocative, with some extraordinary work on the part of your composer Daniel Hart. How did you come to work together?

DL: Daniel grew up with one of my producers, Toby Halbrooks. Daniel went on to be a classically trained violinist; he traveled the world in rock n' roll bands. When I made my short film, *Pioneer*, Toby recommended Daniel, and Daniel did such an extraordinary job on it, with so little input from me, that I felt that this was the guy that I wanted to work with for the rest of my life! So, Daniel was one of those collaborators that I had from day one on this project. He read the script, we talked a little bit about what the instruments were going to be, about the tone of the movie, and how music might influence that tone. Within the first week of editing, he came back with a piece of music that was so perfect, so dynamic — it had those hand claps there, and when I heard those for

the first time, I understood exactly what this movie was going to feel like! We started to cut the movie to the music he was writing. We would send him new footage, he would write more music, he'd send it back. We would just keep exchanging material; it was a constant hand-off. The music and the movie continued to evolve together, and they became intertwined in a way that I never expected.

S2: What is it like to mix up at Skywalker Ranch?

DL: The reason that I got into making movies was because I loved *Star Wars*. So to get to participate in a little bit of that history, while we were making our movie, that was a dream come true. I stayed in the John Ford room, which was very meaningful to me.

S2: *How was *There Will Be Blood* an inspiration for the look of the movie?*

DL: With *There Will Be Blood*, Paul Thomas Anderson recounted how they used old-fashioned anamorphic lenses and photochemical processing techniques to achieve the look of the film. My cinematographer, Bradford Young, consulted with Robert Elswit, who shot *There Will Be Blood*, about how to treat the negative. Also, in *There Will Be Blood*, they designed the shots in a very traditional way; for example, there are a lot of strong medium shots, rather than extreme close-ups. We wanted to shoot *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* in the way that a movie in the '50's or '60's might have been shot.

S2: While you were writing the screenplay, you were considering the dueling notions of romance and responsibility; apparently you were falling in love and getting ready to make some big choices in your life. How did the writing impact your life?

DL: I am happily married to this day. We are coming up on our three-year anniversary. There are certainly things we struggle with, and I don't imagine that I am alone in that. I had my own life, and she had her own life, and we had to figure out how to make those two things work together. But that's what you do when you fall in love. You fight for that. You make those compromises, and you learn how to function as a unit. In writing this movie, I was trying to figure out how I was going to deal with that. I was going through it all on paper, all the worries that I had — but ultimately, you set all those worries aside, and you just trust the fact that because you love this person, that things are going to work out. You have to be willing to work at it, but it is work that I am happy to do.

Ain't Them Bodies Saints is currently in theatres. [Details here.](#)

This entry was posted on Thursday, September 5th, 2013 at 12:10 pm and is filed under [Film](#), [Lifestyle](#)

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