



YOU CAN CHECK OUT BUT YOU CAN NEVER LEAVE

Mysterious strangers collide in Drew Goddard's new *Bad Times* at the El Royale

Bad Times at the El Royale is the multi-talented Drew Goddard's first film as a director since 2012's horror delight *The Cabin in the Woods* — another tale about a group of people in an isolated location having an unexpected and often deadly experience. Goddard is involved in J.J. Abram's unpredictable *Cloverfield* franchise — he wrote the original film — and given the loose weirdness of that “series,” I rather want Goddard to do the same thing with his own films.

Let's see a group of folks having a weird weekend in a castle, or in a strange city, or on a frigid island. (It can't be a warm island. Goddard already worked on *Lost*.) He excels at taking a handful of character types and making something new — and generally bloody — out of them.

The other commonality between *Cabin* and *El Royale* is Chris Hemsworth, whom you may or may not know better as Thor. Six years ago, he was a mere mortal, a 20-something who made a poor choice about how to escape the cabin's clutches.

Now Hemsworth has one of my favorite a-star-goes-dark roles: the dangerous beefcake (see also: Brad Pitt in *Kalifornia*). He waltzes into Goddard's languidly paced film like a big cat, a shirtless cult leader who says, “Let's have an allegory!” as he sets two women against each other to prove a point. (It's a rather *timely* point.)

El Royale is extremely well cast, and Hemsworth is only one of its charms. There's Dakota Johnson, freed of the *Fifty Shades* movies, as a steely hippie trying to help her troubled sister; Jon Hamm, who serves as the audience's introduction to the weirdness of the El Royale itself; Jeff Bridges in grizzled drifter mode with a priest's collar; Lewis Pullman as the hotel's lone employee, the nervous clerk Miles; and, most important, Cynthia Erivo as Darlene Sweet, a singer who's just trying to get to a gig in Reno.

Erivo won a Tony for her performance in the recent Broadway revival of *The Color Purple*, but this and next month's *Widows* are her first film roles. And she walks away with this one. It's not just her voice — Darlene spends quite a bit of time singing — but her presence that captivates. She more than holds her own with Bridges, and has a speech in which she has absolutely had it with fragile little men. It's a mesmerizing moment, and one of several in which Goddard pauses the action to focus on the characters' as-yet-unseen layers.

El Royale may try your patience, though I loved the slow-burn, multi-faceted lead-up to its violent finale. It occasionally slips into worn-out clichés (the female characters are built too overtly on abuse and sexism). But Goddard is an old hand at juggling tropes and character, action and feeling, and the movie reflects the breadth of his resume as a creator and writer: the scrappy vibe of *Buffy*, the puzzle-box of *Lost*, the religious struggle of *Daredevil*.

For all its violence and strife, *El Royale* is a sympathetic movie, and one about how people, given the chance, will continue to surprise you. ■



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