Anyone that's been reading Mitch's movie reviews and "The Crystal Ball" on this site knows that he hasn't been happy with the movie releases over the course of the last nine months. That all changed last Friday, when the first MUST SEE, Oscar worthy film of 2007 hit the theaters. "3:10 To Yuma" is getting phenomenal reviews everywhere you look, and Mitch's is no different. Did it land the elusive "4 football" rating from The Mitch Man? Check and see ...

After almost nine months of fantasies, sequels, super heroes, lowest common denominator comedies, rehashed horror films, and CGI dominated fluff pieces, 2007 finally has a superior film to mark the year. That it comes in the form of a Western that is a remake of a film from 50 years ago is probably appropriate, but that does not take away from the fact that "3:10 to Yuma" is the best movie released so far this year.

Director James Mangold had earlier proved his mettle with "Walk the Line" and "Girl Interrupted". Here, he is blessed as he was with those other two films, having two great actors performing at the peak of their talents in Russell Crowe and Christian Bale. The script is also exceptional, and Mangold takes full advantage, creating an action film in which the dialog and stretches of nothing but one-on-one conversations are just as riveting as the gun battles.

As well it should be. After all, the Western is so often used as a Morality Play. The American West of the late 19th and early 20th century was a place and a time immortalized for its lawlessness, its brutality, the beauty of the landscape, and the ruggedness of the individuals that prospered (or failed) during that time. Tales of Good vs. Evil are prevalent as are stories of heroic men (mostly) standing up against all odds when lesser ones blanch.

It is with that background that Mangold spins his narrative about two men who could not be more different, but nonetheless have more in common than they would like to admit. Russell is Ben Wade, a notorious outlaw in the Butch Cassidy mold, robbing the stagecoaches and trains belonging to the rich and exploitative railroad companies. However, Wade is not romanticized like Butch and his partner Sundance. He is shown as a ruthless killer that will coldly murder another member of his crew if that man puts them all into danger.

On the other hand, he is not a deranged man who loves killing for killing's sake, just one that does it when he feels it is necessary. Early in the film, after taking down an armored stagecoach, he sees that he has been observed by rancher Dan Evans (Christian Bale) and his two young sons. He does not act like criminals from today's crime films and try to kill all the witnesses. He has a brief discussion with Evans and the boys, and then simply takes their horses away from them so they cannot quickly alert the authorities, telling them where they can walk to in order to recover their animals. In thinking about this, you can see the differences in the time periods. Rapid communication did not exist in that time and place, nor did computers, cameras, or satellites. A man with limited morals could take what he pleased, and other than the occasional posse to outrun, faced few circumstances for his actions. This is why the Old West was so fascinating. Men were able to live within their own rules based upon their own personal moral compasses. How an individual behaves given this anarchical backdrop is what

ultimately defines him.

Evans has other problems on his mind. His ranch is failing due to drought, and he is in serious debt. As the film opens, armed men sent by a greedy landowner Evans in is debt to burn down his barn as punishment for non-payment. Desperate for money, Evans agrees to help transport Wade to the town of Constitution to put him on the prison train towards Yuma. It seems Wade got a bit careless for once in his life, spending too much time in the company of a woman, and getting surrounded without help. But Wade seems to have little concern. He tells the local marshal that his men will be back, and will free him and kill anyone standing in their way.

Thus begins the best part of the movie, as Wade engages in a psychological battle with his captors, especially Evans. Wade is as calm, smooth, and confident as Evans is intense, nervous, and loaded with self doubt. A Civil War veteran who lost the lower part of one leg during battle, Evans' guilt about the struggles endured by his wife and two sons eats away at him, and Wade picks at every open sore.

The tension and mind-play is ratcheted up substantially when Evans' headstrong 14 year old son William shows up on the scene, disobeying his father's order to stay at the ranch. William is embarrassed by his father's undistinguished demeanor and perceived lack of fire, and the boy makes his disdain for his father quite obvious. Wade, of course, picks up on this, and drives a wedge further between them by buttering up the boy while subtly denigrating his father. William spends a lot of his (limited) free time reading dime-store novels glorifying the deeds of Outlaws, and as Wade is as famous as any of them, William views him with almost hero worship.

The last third of the film focuses on how Evans (and William) respond to the ever increasing danger as Wade's men, led by the sick sadist Charlie Prince (Ben Foster), close in. As the peril increases, hard choices have to be made. This is not made easier as Wade calmly tempts Evans with the syrupy sweetness of the best used car salesman. Evans is faced with options that he did not anticipate.

It is here that things take a deeper psychological turn, as both men show more complex sides of themselves as the climax approaches...sides that I find it hard to describe without giving away parts of the movie that I would not want to risk spoiling. But I will say that if you look at the unpeeling of each man's layers as the movie goes on, you may have a better understanding of why each behave in the manner that they do towards the end, which would make some of the last events seem a little more logical, despite how confusing they might be as they are first happening.

None of this could be pulled off without the brilliant performances of Bale and Russell. Not once was I reminded by any slip of dialog that these great actors are from Wales and New Zealand respectively. Bales gaunt intensity from a man beaten down by life, but not yet beaten, is worthy of award consideration. Russell is confident without the swagger; ruthless without the malice. The back and forth verbal sparring between them is something I'd expect from a Scorsese mob drama, not a dusty descendent from the John Wayne days of men who said little, shot first and asked questions later.

The performances of the two leads are aided admirably from a wonderful supporting cast. Gretchen Mol plays down her runway model looks as Evans' dutiful wife Alice, while still giving her an independent

life of her own. Young Logan Lerman has a great future on screen in front of him, building on his impressive early resume from the TV show "Jack and Bobby" with his turn as William Evans, a boy becoming a man, and dealing with all of the responsibilities that come with that passage in a frontier town. Ben Foster is barely recognizable as the troubled artist and part-time boyfriend of Claire Fischer in "Six Feet Under". Fanatically devoted to Wade, and possessing a much more expansive bloodlust, Prince is a diabolically scary sidekick in the mold of Michael Biehn as Johnny Ringo in "Tombstone".

Peter Fonda makes a welcome comeback to a major motion picture as the Pinkerton mercenary who epitomizes lawmen who aren't much better than the criminals they pursue. Dallas Roberts and Alan Tudyk round out Wade's captors, both playing men out of their element, but still feeling the need to "do what's right". Neither come across as two dimensional, and both get a couple of small scenes to show their acting skill. And look for a surprising uncredited cameo from Luke Wilson mid-way through the film.

In all, this movie succeeds in every possible way. As a morality play. As an action-adventure flick. And as a psychological thriller. I have not seen the original Van Hefflin-Glenn Ford film, so I'm not sure how similar it is to the original, nor did I have any idea what was going to happen next. The entire movie was a surprise. From the plot twists to the quality of the acting to the feeling of astonishment I experienced at the end from knowing I had just watched a brilliant film that I know I'll want to see again.

Let the season of serious films begin. "3:10 to Yuma" gets it

off on the right hoof.

My rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)