



Guy Pearce and John Hurt in *The Proposition*

## CAVE HELLER

### *The Proposition*

review by M. Faust

Based on a script by Nick Cave, *The Proposition* is perhaps less violent and harrowing than any given song from a Cave album like *Murder Ballads*. But, as Cave fans will recognize, that's an awfully high bar for comparison, and this Australian frontier story is more brutal than many viewers may be able to bear. If you find HBO's *Deadwood* prissy, this is the movie for you.

American reviewers have invariably classified, or at least likened, *The Proposition* as a "revisionist western." In fact the film is Australian to the core, dealing with that country's own unique creation myth; that the milieu has much in common with the American west points out the universal tension between law and freedom, and the tendency of the strong to bully the weak.

The movie opens in Queensland of the 1880s with a shootout. Outlaw Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce) is captured along with his simple-minded teenaged brother Mike (Richard Wilson). Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone), the Englishman imported to act as lawman in the area, offers him a deal: Mike will be hanged in a few weeks unless Charlie finds and kills his older brother Arthur (Danny Huston), the real leader of the gang that has been terrorizing local settlers.

Because Cave and director John Hillcoat (who worked together on the 1985 prison drama *Ghosts of the Civil Dead*) have an aversion to the prosaic, *The Proposition* often leaves viewers searching for a place to locate their sympathies. The opening scenes tend to make us feel that Charlie and Mike are being unjustly accused by Stanley, whose vow that he will "civilize this land" paints him as a colonialist of the worst sort. But we're confounded when Charlie's search for his psychotic brother does not turn the film into a *Down Under Heart of Darkness*. We spend more time with Stanley and his wife Martha (Emily Watson), a delicate Victorian lady struggling to maintain standards in this harsh, unforgiving land. They are depicted not as overt fools but as decent people in a bad bargain.

As for Charlie, who has so little dialogue that one wonders if Guy Pearce suffered from laryngitis while filming in the outback, after a brief visit with a lunatic bounty hunter (played with scene-chewing brio by John Hurt), he is saved from death by native spear by brother Arthur, who turns out to have a poetic side equal to his reputed violence. (Huston steals the film with a performance that would have done his father John proud.) When they learn that the imprisoned Mike has been harshly treated, they ride out for vengeance, a scene you may not anticipate gladly given the grisliness of some of the scenes that have preceded it.

If nothing else, *The Proposition* is an uncompromising film. Hillcoat and Cave are unwavering in their vision of hellish life in a hellish land, captured with awful beauty by French cinematographer Benoît Delhomme. But unlike the anti-westerns of Sergio Leone or Sam Peckinpah, they leave their story with neither cynical humor nor grudging respect. Perhaps the perspective we're meant to come away with is that of the Stanley's aborigine servant (played by the noted Australian actor David Gulpilil, star of *Walkabout* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*): Given the day off for the (to him) incomprehensible holiday of Christmas, he removes his boots and leaves them inside their gate before returning to the land. **av**



Maggie Cheung in *Clean*

## PICKING UP THE PIECES

### *Clean*

review by Girish Shambu

Here's a strange thing: France has a great tradition of film critics who turn into filmmakers, but that's never been the case in America. In France in the 1950s, seduced by the Hollywood movies of Hitchcock and Hawks, a number of whippersnapper critics from the magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*, like Truffaut and Godard, gave birth to the French New Wave. That tradition in France has stayed alive to the present day.

A good example is former critic Olivier Assayas, who is best known for directing *Irma Vep*, a gritty and funny account of the making of a movie. (Reminiscent of Truffaut's *Day for Night*, it's available on DVD and is often cited as one of the best movies of the 1990s.)

*Irma Vep* is a love letter to movies and to its lead actress, Maggie Cheung, the international Hong Kong superstar. Assayas and Cheung were married soon after but were divorced a couple of years later. After their divorce—in an unusual turn—Assayas wrote *Clean* as a vehicle to showcase her versatile acting talents. Since many of Cheung's roles have been in Hong Kong action films, her flexible and powerful performance in *Clean* came as a complete surprise. She won the best actress award for it at the Cannes film festival in 2004.

In the movie, she plays Emily, a rock-and-roll widow and recovering drug addict who loses her husband to a drug overdose. Their six-year-old boy, whom she has barely seen, lives with her in-laws. After emerging from a short stint in prison for possession, Emily tries to pull her life together step by step, trying to find her bearings in the real world, looking for work and stability and hoping to someday regain the trust of her little boy.

On the surface this setup has all the makings of a by-the-numbers TV drama of the week, but that's not how it plays at all. *Clean* turns out to be an utterly gripping and moving film that quickly leaves the clichés of its genre far behind. The contours of the story might be vaguely familiar, but the details of the plot unfold in a steady stream of small surprises. For example, most drug-addict movies like to linger exploitatively on scenes of shooting up or sinking low into the gutter. In *Clean*, we pass over these graphic and melodramatic moments altogether and instead spend time in the everyday. Even an important event like the little boy finding out about the death of his father is passed over entirely. We expect the movie to dust off the custody battle subplot that is so familiar from its genre, but we never go there either.

*Clean* contains two powerhouse, indelible performances. Maggie Cheung's Emily is remarkable because she goes from a cold and self-absorbed addict into a wounded, slightly tentative, but cautiously hopeful woman who wants to one day learn how to be a mother. Nick Nolte, who plays her father-in-law, delivers the single best performance I have ever seen by him. His character is a large and scruffy man, broken up by sorrow, but realizing that he can't admit defeat because there are others around him who depend on him. We see cracks in his craggy face where the sorrow threatens to break him open and he struggles to stay intact. Nolte doesn't show us his naked emotions—instead, he makes us intuit them by underplaying his performance.

I must mention the visual flair of this movie. It's shot by Eric Gautier, one of the world's leading cinematographers, and takes place in many cities—London, Paris, Vancouver—but opens on familiar ground, in Hamilton, Ontario. I've driven past this smoke-streaked factory landscape countless times on the QEW but I never expected it to look as breathtaking and visually poetic as it does here on celluloid. **av**

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