

TV Guide Online Review
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Once Upon a Time in Macedonia

Our Rating: ***

The chaotic, brutal iconography of Italian Westerns is put to novel use in this time-traveling, self-referential, hugely ambitious story of American brothers who, in 1900, play out their bitter sibling rivalry in the wild, wild East. Their legacy of love and hate extends directly to New York City 100 years later, where a nervous young burglar, Edge (Adrian Lester), is ransacking a rundown apartment. Surprised mid-robbery by the apartment's elderly tenant, Angela (Rosemary Murphy), Edge slugs her; much to his surprise, the frail-looking Angela fights back, breaking Edge's nose and pulling an ancient but lethal looking pistol. Gun in hand, Angela demands that Edge listen to a story that begins in 19th-century Oklahoma, where two brothers are about to be set at each other's throats.

Biblical names notwithstanding, Luke (David Wenham) and his younger brother, Elijah (Joseph Fiennes), are opposites; Luke is a hell-raising, skirt-chasing, stone-cold killer, while virginal Elijah is a bible-quoting straight arrow committed to the path of righteousness. Luke naturally leads Elijah astray, escorting him to a local whorehouse where the inexperienced Elijah falls under the spell of a French hooker prophetically named Lilith (Anne Brochet). Elijah marries Lilith, but Luke sleeps with her anyway then flees to Europe to avoid Elijah's wrath.

Luke sees his future in a French cafe, in the form of a flickering newsreel about turmoil in Macedonia. Gangs of every political, religious and mercenary persuasion are running riot, and when chaos reigns there's money to be made by a heartless opportunist like Luke. But while Luke can run from his past, he can't hide. Elijah follows him halfway around the world, his heart seething with vengeance for reasons that are only gradually revealed. And Luke's quest to make his fortune by killing a rebel leader with a price on his head becomes a baroque odyssey through escalating levels of hell on Earth.

Macedonian director Milcho Manchevski's film is far from flawless; in particular, the evolving present-day relationship between the cocky Edge, who isn't as streetwise as he imagines, and the dying Angela feels falsely sentimental. But the Macedonian sequences are breathtaking, unfolding against a sere, desert landscape of blasted villages and bloody corpses.

Manchevski has nothing less in mind than an investigation into the nature of storytelling, twisting and fracturing his narrative and using jarringly disjunctive images to pull the past and present into a moebius strip of cruelty, retribution and hope of heaven.

- Maitland McDonagh