



BORN TO STRUM

The Boss dials down the charisma and amps up the intimacy in 'Springsteen on Broadway' **p.162**

A REAL PHONY

Dacey depictions aside, 'Tiffany's' still endears **p.166**

REVIEWS



FILM REVIEW

BY PETER DEBRUGE

Only the Brave

Director: Joseph Kosinski
Starring: Josh Brolin, Miles Teller, Jeff Bridges, James Badge Dale, Taylor Kitsch, Jennifer Connelly

When a forest catches fire, professionals can't drown it in water or put it out as they might a burning building. Instead, the goal is to contain the inferno by establishing a control line that the advancing flames cannot cross — a strategy of "fighting fire with fire" that falls to an elite hand crew, who've been uniquely certified as "hotshots" to approach the unpredictable beast.

"Only the Brave" is the true story of one such crew, the Granite Mountain Hotshots, and their journey from being a local Arizona firefighting team to the front lines of the Yarnell Hill Fire, one of the country's deadliest wildfires. Like "Backdraft" set against a backdrop of unspoiled American wilderness, it's a gripping and powerfully emotional portrait of yee-haw heroism, pitting a squad of cocky, calendar-purdy white dudes against an adversary with no creed or color, just an unquenchable appetite for destruction.

Like Michael Bay before him, hyper-visual director Joseph Kosinski ("Tron: Legacy," "Oblivion") hails from the world of commercials, and though he doesn't suffer from Bay's attention-deficit style, "Only the Brave" packs the same high-polish recruitment-spot feel witnessed in such high-testosterone servicemen salutes as "Patriots Day" and "13 Hours." Still, while proud of its subject, it's no mere propaganda, and though undeniably spectacular in its devastation, the film offers more depth than your typical disaster movie. As written by Ken Nolan (best known for adapting "Blackhawk Down," working here from Sean Flynn's GQ article), the script divides its time almost →

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Illustration by ROBERT SAMMELIN

← equally between wildland blazes and domestic drama — it humanizes even as it valorizes.

Led by rawhide local fire chief Eric Marsh (Josh Brolin, giving his best Tommy Lee Jones impersonation) and balanced by the ex-junkie recruit to whom he offers a second chance (another fine performance from the versatile Miles Teller), these are imperfect heroes, struggling with relatable problems.

The film begins at a point when Marsh's team is still doing Type 2 fire mitigation duty, clearing brush and burning fire lines relatively far from the danger itself. An early scene, in which the lead crews ignore Marsh's prediction that the massive Cave Creek Complex Wildfire would turn and consume a nearby residential area, tragically illustrates why this gruff alpha personality ought to be leading the fight rather than doing cleanup duty behind hotshots.

While the firefighters are off battling blazes, local screw-up Brendan McDonough (Teller) is getting high and arrested. His strung-out scenes make an odd sort of interruption from the buddy-buddy bonding seen among the professionals, until we realize that McDonough intends to straighten up by joining the Prescott Wildland Firefighters — earning a break because Marsh sees a younger version of himself in the kid.

Meanwhile, on the home front, the movie has Marsh's formidable wife, Amanda (Jennifer Connelly), stand in for all the women who hold down their households while their husbands are away risking their lives. In charge of the couple's ranch, she may look brittle, but she's got a will of steel, and her character — unusually well developed for such a film — is as strong as any of the men.

More than other recent examples of the everyday-hero genre, "Only the Brave" serves as an extended introduction to a specific line of work (it even features the line "If this isn't the greatest job in the world, I don't know what is!") and concerns itself with the kind of office politics



Hotshots
Miles Teller and Taylor Kitsch play members of an elite group of firefighters in Sony's "Only the Brave."

Heat Relief

How to aid victims of the California wildfires:

Airbnb hosts can house victims and relief workers. Animal lovers can foster dogs and cats from affected shelters like the **Silicon Valley Humane Society**. Or you can donate to or volunteer at local organizations or the **Red Cross**.

most people would prefer to leave behind when going to the movies (as when Jeff Bridges, bordering on self-parody, helps Brolin get his squad certified as the country's first municipal hotshot crew).

Despite — or maybe even because of — the relevance suggested by ongoing efforts to control raging California wildfires, the film faces an awkward challenge in communicating why audiences ought to run out and watch this story on the big screen. The reason should be obvious: These wildfires are a sight to behold, and through a mix of digital and practical effects, the movie allows us to get closer than humanly possible to the awesome inferno — a vision every bit as impressive, and far more believable, than anything DC or Marvel might concoct this fall.

Whether audiences realize it or not, a battle is underway for control of the box office — superheroes versus real-life

heroes — and this represents a worthy example of the latter, in which a group of back-slapping, tobacco-spitting, interchangeably handsome actors succeed in making distinct impressions. Their fate, no mystery to those who followed the Yarnell Fire in 2013, is further suggested by the title (the opening words of a quotation by Greek historian Dionysius), and yet, "Only the Brave" handles these events in such a powerful way that if cinemas could collect all the tears spilled on their floors, America's next wildland fire wouldn't stand a chance. **B+**

CREDITS: A Sony release of a Columbia Pictures, Black Label Media presentation of a di Bonaventura Pictures, Conde Nast Entertainment, Black Label Media, Relevant Entertainment production. **Producers:** Lorenzo di Bonaventura, Michael Menchel, Erik Howsam, Molly

Smith, Thad Luckinbill, Trent Luckinbill, Dawn Ostroff, Jeremy Steckler. **Executive producer:** Ellen H. Schwartz. **Director:** Joseph Kosinski. **Screenplay:** Ken Nolan, Eric Warren Singer, based on the GO article "No Exit," by Sean Flynn. **Camera (color, wide-screen):** Claudio

Miranda. **Editors:** Billy Fox. **Music:** Joseph Trapanese. Reviewed at Regency Village, Los Angeles, Oct. 8, 2017. **MPAA Rating:** PG-13. **Running time:** 134 MIN. **CAST:** Josh Brolin, Miles Teller, Josh Brolin, Miles Teller, Jeff Bridges, James Badge Dale, Taylor Kitsch, Jennifer Connelly

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