

A Million Ways to Die in the West



A review by Garry Victor Hill

A Million Ways to Die in the West. Produced by Seth MacFarlane, Scott Stuber and Jason Clarke. Directed by Seth MacFarlane. Screenplay by Seth MacFarlane, Alec Sulkin and Wellesley Wild. Photography by Michael Barrett. Music by Seth Linn.

Length: 116 minutes. Production Company: Media Rights Capitol and Fuzzy Door Productions. Bluegrass Films. Universal Pictures Distribution. Cinematic Release May 2014. Available on DVD.

Rating *** 30%

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CAST

Albert Stark: Seth MacFarlane

Anna: Charlize Theron

Louise: Amanda Seyfried

Clinch Leatherwood: Liam Neeson

Edward: Giovanni Ribisi

Ruth: Sarah Silverman

Foy: Neal Patrick Harris

Lewis: Evan Jones

Sherriff: Rex Linn

Millie: Alex Borstein

Old Time Miner: Matt Clark

Cochise: Wes Studi

Albert's Father: Christopher Hagen

The Pastor: John Alword

Dan: Ralph Garman

Abraham Lincoln: Gilbert Gottfried

Django: Jamie Foxx

Usually this reviewer is a pushover for Hollywood westerns, not this time. If only three adjectives could be applied to this film they would be puerile, crass and disappointing.

A Million Ways to Die in the West begins promisingly. We are faced with the action straight away as a sheep farmer Albert Stark (played by director/ star/ co-producer/ co-writer Seth MacFarlane) reluctantly faces a main street gunfight. The smiling crowds are gathered hopefully expecting a bloody shootout and are disappointed when Albert chickens out. He loses his girlfriend Louise (Amanda Seyfried) over this and when in the bar with his friends Ruth (Sarah Silverman) and Edward (Giovanni Ribisi) reveals that he hates the West and wants a city life in San Francisco. As Albert tells them some of the nine million ways there are to die suddenly and prematurely in the West they are visualised in rapid fire sequences. So far so good, we are given an unusual hero and an unusual outlook both going against stereotypes, The film has already shown fine photography, scenery, sets, editing, costumes and pacing.

Then things start to go wrong. The indications come in that this film will be self-indulgent and will go off the rails. When the sheriff gets dragged off by wolves to be devoured this apparently is intended to be funny, but appears as too realistic for that. This wake up develops further with the obscenities that never stop. Apparently the writers know of only one adjective and exclamation and that can be the most common verb as well. Annoying at first, the obscenities just become tedious. This resembles dealing with a twelve year old brat who smugly recites obscenities in your face for what he thinks must be shock value and never realises that the audience is bored with it, Similarly virginal Edward having his first sex experience with his girlfriend, Ruth appears as so distasteful I nearly walked out. This scene came as no surprise as before this he continually and cheerfully and acceptingly refers to her “work” as she lets herself be picked up by fat slobs in front of him in scene after scene. Is this supposed to be funny? This is about as funny as seeing a trusting child fed alive to crocodiles. It was not funny the first time and so this idea gets expressed again and again, as if sooner or later the joke will be funny. This mentality, like so much in the film comes from the first years of adolescence and has the nasty cruelty so common

in that age range. The feeding of laxatives to Foy, (Neal Patrick Harris) the oily conniving shop owner becomes another example of adolescent crassness. Most people do not enjoy close ups of used toilet bowls for humour. Question: Who does? Answer: Twelve year old brats delighting in shock value. The dealings with sex, casual violence and drugs also come across this way and permeates most of the film with this puerile mentality. Not all the jokes are crass and some are genuinely funny, but they are a minority.



Liam Neeson does as well as anyone can in a cartoon villain's role.

Stereotypes start appearing and like the extras form in muddled, noisy herds, wandering about, not knowing what they should do, rather like Albert's sheep. Their usual acting comes across as of the loud, broad type that lacks any subtlety, depth or surprises. Stereotypically when an old miner (Matt Clark) appears he travels alone except for his donkey, has his ratty hat rim pinned back and shows us his white beard squint and ragged clothes. The villain who shoots him, Clinch Leatherwood

(Liam Neeson) wears dark clothes, a dark hat and scowls and threatens a lot. In fact he has almost no other dialogue. He blasts people away in ways that are apparently meant to be funny, just like his eventual death, which we see done in a sneaky way we are meant to find admirable. Why Leatherwood wants money so desperately remains a mystery: he enjoys nothing, plans no future and has no debts. Perhaps the money goes on replenishing the ammunition he so wantonly uses. He serves as an 1882 prototype for Super Mario, a killer robot who shoots people at any opportunity.



Charlize Theron teaches Seth MacFarlane how to shoot. Her skills would have been better used teaching some people how to act.

Similarly stereotyped is Foy, the oily creep has a three piece suit, a bowler hat and oiled upturned mustachios that go with his leers and his

insinuating comments. That type had become a stereotype in music hall days a generation before films emerged in the 1890s. Similar clichés include Whores with Hearts of Gold, Snake Oil Merchants with waxed moustaches, smug grins and artificially cheery voices, Overweight Aged Brothel Madams with dyed blond hair and sneering knowing tones and wise old Indian Chiefs, dispensing wisdom about life, the ways of the cosmos and how to defeat your enemies.



Nobody can accuse the filmmakers of taking feminism too far

The scenes with Indians are drugged out and resemble the worst 1960s hippie movies in their hallucinating scenes, The filmmakers here try to revive that genre for a scene and make a western at the same time. The result is that the film loses what coherence it has, goes off the rails and even returning to clichés cannot restore it.

Umberto Eco wisely commented that when one stereotype turns up a cliché appears: when they all do it is a celebration. Perhaps this could have worked with more genuine humour and less cruelty. This may be the kindest way to see this movie, which is about Albert changing from an inept, fearful father-dominated human doormat into a western hero.

He does that with Anna's help. In this role Charlize Theron comes close to saving this movie; photogenic, funny and zestful, she gets some of the best lines and presents a rounded character. Even so, one cast member cannot save a movie that lacks taste, depth, originality or any restraint on self-indulgence. I do not object to Western comedies that are made for the youth market. Far from objecting to zany parodies of the Western genre I like them, even when going full blast on energy and going off the rails. *The Paleface*, *Alias Jesse James*, *Support Your Local Sherriff*, *Support Your Local Gunfighter*, *Cat Ballou*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Great Bank Robbery*, *Blazing Saddles* and *The Lone Ranger* were all fine and popular movies because they were not only full of energy, they were fun to watch. This movie only sometimes manages to do that. Sometimes is not enough and only shows what could have been. Somebody, somewhere should have stepped in and rewrote and reshot about half of *A Million Ways to Die in the West*.