

ENTERTAINMENT



John Woo's 'Windtalkers': The Continuing Saga of Tonto and GI Joe

By SEAN SMITH

So, why exactly is this film titled "Windtalkers"? That's the question I struggled to answer while I sat bored watching this nearly 2 1/2-hour waste of time and money.

Sure enough, the movie opens with a grainy windswept view of Monument Valley (same shot that opens Mission Impossible 2 only without the rock climbing Tom Cruise), a scene that would feel right at home in a John Ford western.

The camera dips and dives through the sky as we watch a group of Navajo men say their tearful goodbyes to family and friends as they leave the reservation to be exploited by the Army for their linguistic skill. We then get 5 minutes of Navajo soldiers training to use the code and three times in the film the code is actually used, but that's it.

The rest of the film ignores the code talkers and delves into a mindless action/World War II buddy film that uses the Battle of Saipan as the background for every war movie trope Woo could throw at us.

Here's the plot of the film. The always-brooding and distant Sgt. Joe Enders (Nicolas Cage) has to protect the code, not the code talker, at all costs even if this means killing his charge. Simple plot, simple movie; you don't have to know the secret code to figure this one out. But you will need a decoder to find a story in this film.

What the audience is left with is cacophony of explosions, gunfire and Marines screaming at the top of their lungs. One might think that this would be perfect territory for the ballet-style action of John Woo. Unfortunately it's not. Woo's action sequences, and they take up 90 percent of the movie, are boring, uninteresting and violent without purpose. Gee John, is war really Hell, you mean it wasn't all heroic fun and games, people sometimes died? I thought we'd already figured that out, but apparently Woo wants to hit us over the head with this message.

It's a message, though, that is confused. His writers, and I use the term loosely (there is at best 30 minutes of interesting dialogue in the film the rest is corny war movie one liners), can't figure out if this is an anti-war film or a remake of the "Sands of Iwo Jima."

Case in point: In every battle, marines are dying at an incredible rate and yet our hero, GI Joe Enders, can run upright through bullets, grenades, land mines, bayonets and mortar fire all the while mowing down well-trained, well-hidden, well-armed Japanese soldiers with a pistol and emerge virtually unscathed at the end of the battle. I thought this well-worn heroism died with John Wayne.

Outside of physical improbability, how much longer are we going to have to sit through WWII movies with a rag tag group of soldiers — the Italian or Greek street kid from New York, the country or southern

hick, the kid who doesn't want to fight, and the you-name-the-minority soldier (Black, Hispanic, Navajo) — who are brought together by a brooding, hard-nosed sergeant and the horrors of war. You'd probably be stunned if I told you that the countrified hick hates the Navajo code talkers and compares them to the Japanese. I bet you'd be even more surprised when the hick picks a fight with one of the code talkers, calls him all sorts of names, but is ultimately saved by the Navajo and comes to love him as a brother by the end of the film.

This is the type of predictability that makes what could have been an interesting movie a riotous bore.

The performances are, for the most part, flat, tedious and one-dimensional. This is hardly the fault of the actors; the script they were given leaves them no other choice. Adam Beach (from "Smoke Signals," a fantastic movie that everyone should rent) plays the dimensionless Yahzee with all the charm he can muster, but the character is written to be a Navajo super saint, so he doesn't have too much to work with.

Christian Slater and Roger Willie add some color as another Navajo-code protector pairing, and do what they can with the movie's requisite cultural bonding subplot, making beautiful music together, one on the harmonica, the other on the Navajo flute.

Likable character actors Peter Stormare, Mark Ruffalo and Noah Emmerich get to put on camouflage and play war with the big boys.

Only Cage's incessant glower is a consistent bore.

In one laughable scene — although the entire movie is laughable — Yahzee and a Japanese soldier stand a few feet away from each other, guns leveled on each other's head, neither shooting. Huh, where have I seen this before? Oh yeah, "Face Off," "Mission Impossible 2," "Broken Arrow" and every other film John Woo has misdirected. It's time to move on John, the gag is old.

I won't even delve into the historical inaccuracies of this film. Suffice it to say that John Woo's long list of military advisors must have been totally ignored in the making of this movie.

Ultimately, what could have been an interesting and poignant tribute to Native Americans and their contribution to the Allied forces in World War II winds up exploiting and manipulating their story, never giving full credit for their participation in the war effort and all the while celebrating the heroisms of the white Joe Enders.

Hey wait, this may be the only place John Woo gets American history right. In other words, don't bother — you may have better luck with "Scooby Doo."

MOVIE REVIEW: He Said/He Said

What 'Windtalkers' Lacks in Originality, it More Than Makes Up for in Gore

By PETE BROOKS



Having just sat through John Woo's new film, "Windtalkers" at the megaplex, and "Blackhawk Down" in my front room during the same weekend, I have come to a couple of conclusions:

One, it's awfully good for the good ol' USA that this reporter never had to jump out of an airplane or storm a beach for freedom. Nervous people like me are just not cut out for functioning under live fire.

And two, John Wayne wouldn't have lasted five minutes longer in actual combat than I would have.

"Sands of Iwo Jima" this ain't.

The classic-era war movies were crafted in such a fashion to make young men want to run out and take up arms, and hurl themselves into the Good Fight.

War was portrayed as glamorous and honorable and you made new friends and you went places, and hey — when you did find yourself in combat, most of the good guys were gonna be coming back home with you, and the ones who didn't, well, they died real tidy and dramatic.

Weeping strings and everything.

In today's war films, baby, nobody's guaranteed a trip home, not even the stars.

The good guys get cut down left and right, and we're right there on top of the action and in the way of flying body parts.

We're talking a new breed of war movie here.

It's about as nerve-rattling an experience as you can have without actually drawing casualties right there in the theater.

Unlike the classic war pix, "Windtalkers" is definitely not going to be a recruitment tool for the armed services.

Besides the gut-wrenching level of combat-scene verisimilitude, though, director Woo ("Face Off," "Mission Impossible 2") seems to have set out to make himself an old-fashioned WWII movie.

In style, tone and structure, "Windtalkers" apes the conventions of the classic WWII-flick genre, without sacrificing any of its own narrative integrity ... or graphic carnage.

It hits all the clichés, but seems to do so honestly. Certain stock scenes just lend themselves to this kind of movie, and they're mostly all represented here.

I had heard early criticisms that this was going to be another one of those "noble white man" stories, where the ethnic lead plays second banana to the high-minded, well-meaning Caucasian. If you don't know what I'm talking about, go rent "Glory" or "Cry Freedom."

Happily, I didn't find that to be the case here.

The second lead, Adam Beach ("Squanto," "A Warrior's Tale"), is the real star of this film.

A Saulteaux Indian from Manitoba, Canada, Beach has about equal screen time

as headliner Nick Cage, and was the much more likeable character.

Even more appealing was Beach's Native American costar, Roger Willie, in a smaller role as the "windtalker" assigned to Christian Slater's character.

Cage — who can be enjoyable when he's playing over the top and chewing the scenery — underplays his standard misfit whack-job character so much here, he kind of recedes from the screen.

After a brief intro back on the reservation, the movie hits the ground running with a bit of the old ultra-violence, ala "Saving Private Ryan."

We watch with Cage as his men are all killed off, one at a time, and only he is spared. He gets blown up, but it being only the first 15 minutes of the film, he survives.

After recuperating at a VA hospital, Cage is itching to get back into the fray. I think the idea is, he's feeling guilty about having survived and is looking for a way to get himself killed.

Instead, he and Slater draw an assignment to "bodyguard" a pair of Navajo codetalkers.

Much googly-eyed mooning ensues on Cage's part when he is also ordered to kill his codetalker if it looks like he's about to fall into enemy hands.

Eventually, the bunch of them are dispatched with the Marines to take some god-forsaken but strategically important island out in the middle of nowhere.

While overall seeming to strive for battle-scene authenticity — often to a stomach-turning degree — the movie plays awfully fast and loose with Cage's kill-rate. With a million Japanese bullets whizzing ineffectually past his pointy movie-star head, Cage's character seems to drop at least two men with every shot he squeezes off.

Besides that — for good and ill — Woo plays down most of his trademark excesses.

There's only one classic "John Woo Moment" that I caught: The Gun Face-Off, where two guys have their guns jammed in each others' faces, playing a game of hair-trigger chicken.

Usually this moment is played for edge-of-your-seat thrills; here it just leaves you with your heart in your throat.

Also, it should be noted that this movie is wicked loud. I saw more than one senior movie-goer with her hands clamped over her ears for extended periods. Come to think of it, these same people were averting their gaze during the gore-filled action sequences.

Safe to say, this movie — and its ilk — just isn't for everyone.

Between my getting older every day, and Hollywood's ability to give the audience a "you-are-there"-eye-view of combat ... "The Sands of Iwo Jima" is looking better and better all the time.