

Review: Mudbound

[James Wright](#) isn't so sure about Netflix's big Oscar hope

Sunday 26 November 2017



Image: Netflix

5/10

Director: Dee Rees

Starring: Garrett Hedlund, Carey Mulligan, Jason Mitchell, Jason Clarke

Length: 2hr 14m

Rating: 15

There has been significant awards buzz surrounding *Mudbound* ever since Netflix bought the rights for a whopping \$12.5 million at this year's Sundance Film Festival. Could this be the first feature film to take the streaming service to the Oscars?

The film is set in rural Mississippi and follows two young men (Garrett Hedlund and Jason Mitchell) returning to their families after World War II. It deals with their reverse culture-shock as they seek to 'fit in' back at home – a task made more difficult by the racism that pervades the community – and the question of what it means to belong is posed and lightly explored. We are also privy to their respective families and their responses to the returning soldiers.



Image: Netflix

The McAllan family centres around Henry (Jason Clarke) and Laura (Carey Mulligan), whilst the Jackson family is built upon Hap (Rob Morgan) and Florence (Mary J. Blige) – two married couples, one working for the other. The dynamics between them are complicated – there’s a certain amount of respect and goodwill but always with an underlying sense of tension and uneasiness, almost as if the respect (on both sides) is a facade masking the true thoughts of each character. Add to this Henry’s racist father (Jonathan Banks) and we have a true ensemble piece. The spotlight shifts throughout, giving characters time to reflect on or vent about the various injustices of the world, though unfortunately the lack of a central protagonist does not work in the film’s favour. Without a focus, the film at times feels haphazard and messy. The implementation of multiple voiceovers presumably is intended to guide the audience through its multiple narratives yet all it succeeds in doing is distracting us from the unfolding events.

There is also a rather large pacing issue at the beginning. In its desperate attempts to exhibit all significant events prior to the plot, the film drags unbearably – hashing out every detail that we could possibly need to know in order to understand something further down the line. There is no respect for the audience in this regard, no acknowledgement that generally people will be able to work out what happens in a war and don’t therefore need to be shown it with cheap, too-clean-to-be-in-an-actual-war practical effects. Cutting the first 15-20 minutes is an easy win.

All that being said, some of the craft on show is really quite excellent. Hedlund is the acting standout, immediately convincing as the once cocky, now suffering, veteran. Morgan, too, produces some praiseworthy work – sadness and joy captured in a single facial expression. The cinematography, production design, and costume design are also worth mentioning and Rees’ direction of her actors is solid. There will be some sort of awards recognition for this film, but that will almost certainly be down to its subject matter as opposed to its quality. It’s frustrating because there are elements of a knock-out film here, but sadly the execution is average and any intended emotional response is blemished by it.



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