

film review

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Run Through the Jungle

By Josef Woodard, December 14, 2006

***Apocalypto*. Rudy Youngblood, Dalia Hernandez, Jonathan Brewer, and Morris Birdyellowhead star in a film written by Farhad Safinia and Mel Gibson and directed by Gibson.**

Reviewed by *Josef Woodard*

Mel Gibson has been getting a bad rap lately for assorted misdeeds and misspeaking, and most of the scowling scrutiny is due to a focus on the artist rather than the art. Meanwhile, however, his directorial chops have soared. He has effectively transformed himself from a goofy B-level marquee actor to an important voice in American film, not to mention a bold individualist who dares to work outside the system to follow his heart and mind as an artist.

The Passion of the Christ is a brilliant film, the finest crucifixion story to hit the big screen (and necessarily, the most violent). The new Gibson film, *Apocalypto*, doesn't quite rise to that level, but Gibson does deliver a riveting and unprecedented vision of native Maya life, in the Maya tongue and without the Dances with Wolves syndrome of a white heroic interloper in the mix.

Our story begins about a half-millennium ago, with villagers leading a blithe existence in sync with the jungle around them. Yet all is not happy in this pre-conquistador, late phase of the Maya civilization. A brutal Maya raid — part of a sweep for the Maya slave and human-sacrifice trade — uproots their peace.

Take away the exotic milieu and the exploration of ancient life, and Gibson has given us a new and visceral kind of action film, with “action” pitched at various speeds. Much of the first half involves torturous trudging, as the kidnapped villagers slowly wend through the jungle toward the harrowing (and visually dazzling) city of doom, with a temple scene straight out of history — and out of a nightmare.

Much of *Apocalypto*'s final act is a fast-paced chase scene, a manic yet tightly choreographed run through the jungle (we haven't seen such adrenaline-pumping running sequences since *Run Lola Run*). Our hero, Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood), is hurtling back to the village, seeking to reunite with his abandoned family, and start a new life. Alas, the newly arriving Spanish conquistadors have a different kind of new life and new world in mind. Maybe that's the sequel-in-the-making. Either way, Gibson scores again.