

## *The Proposition*

*The Proposition*, a new western, is much like the rural Australia in which it is filmed: violent, harsh and brutal. Set in the 1880's, the movie follows Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone), a colonial sheriff set on taming the violent Burns gang that is responsible for a local murder. Having captured two of the three Burns brothers, Charlie (Guy Pearce) and Mikey (Richard Wilson), Stanley offers Charlie the project that is the source of the movie's title: kill his remaining brother, the mythically violent Arthur (Danny Huston), or Stanley will hang young Mikey. Charlie begins his wandering search for his brother and his gang while Stanley struggles with the pressures inherent to his position: ensuring domesticity for a colonial population while also subduing the aboriginal peoples. Charlie eventually finds his brother, and the two of them make their way back towards Stanley, who is slowly sinking in the tension between his domestic tranquility and the violence of the land in which it is found. The ending, though not unforeseen, is suitably gory and desultory, and it's unclear who has won and who has been defeated.

Written by musician Nick Cave, the film's language is sparse and harsh, and Cave demonstrates a solid ear for the direct cadence of the frontiersman. Sadly his capacities with a story are underdeveloped: at times the film – not unlike much of Cave's music – feels stuck in the depth and heaviness of feeling it is trying to convey, and several times things occur (the slaying of a group of aborigines) whose relevance is unknown. Cave's world is harsh and draconian, a morally sparse outback on the fringes of society; often one senses Cave's self-awareness of the seriousness of this position, and even more often one feels as if there is no other option but to sink with Cave and crew into the arid desert he has created.

Benoit Delhomme, the film's Director of Photography, captures the empty, arid feel of the outback tremendously, and there several scenes of true beauty: watch for the drops of blood being wrung from a whip like water from a mop; study the contrast not only between the Stanley's garden and the surrounding landscape, but especially so when the servant Tobey removes his shoes and steps outside the fence. Watch as flies gather like liquid carbuncles on the backs of men.

The acting is all around tremendous, the cast reason itself to see the film. Pearce is a hollow, sunken eyed figure reminiscent of Eastwood at his finest, his body's leanness indifferent and his moral inclinations enigmatic. Huston is a hulking, ursine presence, prone to grisly violence and poetic philosophizing, the latter of which, to my mind, detracted from, rather than rounded out, his character. Emily Watson gives a great turn as Captain Stanley's domesticated wife Martha: the scene in which she watches the flogging of young Mikey is perhaps one of the film's best. Ray Winstone is convincing as Captain Stanley, though his character is also hampered by Cave's writing; instead of the strong and dominating incarnation of the law Stanley is hampered by headaches and wimpy speech (once is enough for a man of Winstone's presence to state his intentions to civilize the land, and when Cave has him repeat the phrase it only undermines his natural robustness).

In film – as in politics and much else – there is a tension between persuading and bullying. *The Proposition*, true to the brute violence it depicts, forces viewers into its world, relying upon power rather than persuasion in its presentation. This may limit the film’s appeal, as many viewers might not enjoy the bloody harshness of the film. It’s hard to imagine Cave and company being concerned about such trifles. Their focus is on driving viewers quite literally into the heat and bloodshed and moral sparseness of the time. You won’t leave this movie feeling good, but there’s much still worthwhile in the viewing.