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REEL WORLD



Wild horses

**A tangled tale
of redemption**

The storyline of *The Mustang* seems obvious and simple right from the beginning, but there's something peculiar, mysterious and fascinating about it, too, from start to finish.

Writer-director Laure De Clermont-Tonnerre, a French actress making an impressive debut as a feature-film director, wastes no time setting up the story's central premise—the relationship of an imprisoned man and a wild horse, in circumstances rife with the promise of some kind of redemption. *The Mustang* keeps that promise, but the process of getting there is more intriguingly tangled than you might have guessed, as is the end result.

by
**Juan-Carlos
Selznick**



The Mustang
Starring Matthias Schoenaerts, Jason Mitchell and Bruce Dern. Directed by Laure De Clermont-Tonnerre. Pageant Theatre, Rated R.

The film maintains a plain-spoken directness throughout, and yet it also proves a richly effective mixture of genres—western, prison film, horse story, saga of redemption and rebirth, robustly sentimental psychodrama, etc. Clermont-Tonnerre's shrewdly evocative directorial style has much to do with the smoldering emotional power the film generates from its seemingly simple and obvious elements.

In a scene where a man rages at a horse as a “dumb animal,” we see the horse and the man as well in terms that suggest the awakening of another kind of awareness altogether. And in another, a prison official gives a prisoner directions for a particularly significant escape without ever making explicit mention of anything other than the absurdity of the prisoner's predicament.

The Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts (*Rust and Bone*) plays Roman Coleman, a deeply withdrawn convict with a history of violence who is the tale's chief human character. Coleman is in a Nevada prison that has a rehabilitation program in which select convicts can work at capturing and taming wild mustangs. It's there that Coleman first encounters the dangerously rebellious mustang with whom he'll form a perilously restorative bond.

That horse and the Nevada outback are, in effect, major characters in the story as Coleman gradually recovers from the emotional degree zero in which he is stuck at the outset. And a number of other characters bring life to the drama of resurgence.

Bruce Dern, still bristling at age 82, is particularly impressive as the crusty old rancher/horse trainer who supervises the mustang rehab operation. Jason Mitchell is especially lively as the convict named Henry, a black cowboy and trick rider who figures crucially in some key plot twists.

Gideon Adlon is sharp as Coleman's profoundly alienated daughter, Martha; her emotionally fraught prison visits help spark her father's renewal while also bringing the depths and costs of her father's failings more fully into view. Connie Britton, meanwhile, plays a prison psychologist in ways that serve both as nuanced portrait and rueful caricature. □



Poor



Fair



Good



Very Good



Excellent