

REEL WORLD



Ghosts of the west

Yellowstone prequel, 1883, a gratifying 10 hours of streaming



Isabel May as Elsa Dutton in 1883.

It was gratifying, but not entirely surprising, to discover—somewhat belatedly—that 1883, the 10-episode “prequel” to the *Yellowstone* series, is a richly engaging movie experience.

by
Juan-Carlos Selznick

Its 10 one-hour-long episodes follow the travails of a westward-bound wagon train whose leading characters include the pioneering ancestors of the Dutton family, the modern-day ranchers of *Yellowstone*. As such, it churns up a mildly daring mixture of Wild West adventure and dynastic melodrama. It’s a flamboyant precursor to the *Yellowstone* brand of soap opera and, better yet, it’s also a vigorously entertaining western—part history lesson, part pulp fiction.

A battered old Union soldier named Shea Brennan (Sam Elliott) leads the wagon train along with his right-hand man, Thomas (LaMonica Garrett), a black Civil War vet still wearing his uniform. James Dutton (Tim McGraw), a grim Civil War survivor on the Confederate side, is a de facto co-leader, who refuses to commit to full partnership with Brennan but keeps making common cause with him as the dangers to his wife and

two children begin to multiply.

Faith Hill (as Margaret Dutton) and Isabel May (as Elsa, the Duttons’ recklessly adventurous daughter) have major roles, thus making mother-daughter and father-daughter dramas key parts of the tale. And, in many respects, Elsa becomes the central figure in 1883. She’s the voiceover narrator, from start to finish, and she is the active ingredient in the film’s frontier-style feminism as well as its cross-cultural romancing.

The westward thrust of the story explicitly moves away from the carnage of the Civil War (Brennan and Dutton both experience horrific losses) and on toward a new start that includes an at least partially healing rapport with Native Americans. The multicultural episodes center in particular on Elsa’s romance with—and fleeting marriage to—an English-speaking Comanche who calls himself Sam (Martin Sensmeier). Thomas’ increasingly serious dalliance with Noemi (Gratiela Brancusi), a widowed gypsy and mother of two, furthers that aspect, as do Brennan’s encounters with Native American characters, including a calmly authoritative elder played by Graham Greene near journey’s end.

The large, friskily diverse cast includes brief appearances by Billy Bob Thornton (as a fearsome Texas marshal), Tom Hanks (as General George Meade), series writer/creator Taylor Sheridan (as legendary gun-toting cattleman Charlie Goodnight) and Greene’s “Spotted Eagle.” Eric Nelsen and Noah Le Gros are good as young cowboys who take a liking to Elsa—flirtatious with the latter and flat-out besmitten with the former.

Elliott, McGraw, Hill and Garrett deliver solid performances within Sheridan’s lively mixture of classic western tropes and edgy historical nuance. The characterization of Elsa and May’s mildly uneven performance seem to have drawn very mixed reactions from online reviewers. She does seem callow and a bit saccharine at times, but I think that’s partly a byproduct of the poetry and mysticism in the lines Sheridan has written for her. Overall, I’m inclined to welcome her placid readings of Sheridan’s almost-purple prose. It’s rather as if her voiceovers make her into a ghostly romantic spirit, hovering over glories that are both heavenly and hellish. □

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