

*ciné*SARNIA Winter 2009 presents:

Appaloosa



Director: Ed Harris

Cast: Ed Harris, Viggo Mortensen, Renée Zellweger, Jeremy Irons, Lance Henriksen

Canadian Distributor: Alliance Films

Country: USA

Language: English

Runtime: 114 minutes

Format: Colour/35mm

Rating: 14A

Westerns have been making a comeback in the past few years. In Ed Harris's second film behind the camera – after the highly successful and remarkable *Pollock* – he and Viggo Mortensen hitch up horses and set off into New Mexico. The two ease effortlessly into their roles as a couple of rugged, no-nonsense peacemakers who drift into a troubled western outpost and decide to stay and put things right.

Based on the novel by Robert B. Parker, *Appaloosa* centres on a typical western town – clapboard houses, a jail, hotel and saloon, boardwalks lining the main street – that is being terrorized by a vicious rancher and his thuggish hired hands. As the film begins, the local sheriff and his deputy are ruthlessly gunned down by Bragg (Jeremy Irons), the rancher who recognizes no law but his own. To the defenceless local townspeople, Virgil (Harris) and Everett (Mortensen) are a sight for sore eyes when they ride into town. Virgil asks for complete power, and it is eventually granted; he pins on his sheriff's badge and appoints Everett his deputy. An uneasy peace descends, and things take a turn for the better when the local stagecoach arrives. Out steps the petticoated Allison (Renée Zellweger), a woman with a dubious past who instantly catches Virgil's eye. The scene is now set for the drama to play out.

Action is certainly present, but it is not the mainstay of *Appaloosa*. Harris is interested in exploring the domestication of a renegade who also feels a strong pull of loyalty to a friend. The banter is what gives the film its comic edge; Virgil strives to look more educated than he is, but can never find the right word, while Everett is always there to help out with both his vocabulary and his gun. Virgil's feelings for Allison grow. Can they both settle down, and if so, with each other? Meanwhile, Bragg has to be subdued, but is he willing to go easily into the night?

Harris gently moves the drama along, relishing the relaxed exploration of relationships. With its sterling cast and detailed performances, *Appaloosa* is that rare film that truly understands friendship among men.

Piers Handling