

Four Brothers Film Review:

“*Four Brothers* is a runaway train of raw emotions and uncontrollable testosterone.”

Four Brothers starts with a murder of a kind, elderly woman, Evelyn Mercer, that we the audience barely know or barely care about. But by the end of the film you leave the theater saying to yourself that must've been one helluva an old lady. You have to conclude that not because of all the diverse and mournful people showing her respect and love at her funeral. Or the warm and friendly flashbacks from her sons, Bobby, Mark Wahlberg; Angel, Tyrese Gibson; Jeremiah, Andre Benjamin and Jack, Garrett Hedlund. And the film's title means the four Mercers are not biological brothers—but rather the more spiritual we all grew up together with “tough sh*t to overcome in life” type of brothers.

You know Evelyn Mercer is special because her sudden and violent demise is responsible for her dear and caring adopted sons turning Detroit upside down, bullets flying everywhere, wild car chases, bodies dropping left and right--literally from the sky, and folks getting threatened to be burned alive on the spot if did not help them avenge her death. She had to be special for all the turmoil that happens over her. Evelyn is played wonderfully by veteran actress Fionnula Flanagan, who's big theatrical break came in 2002 in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. But to be fair Evelyn has been seen regularly on TV, *Revelations*, *Nip & Tuck*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, etc., and doing films for thirty plus years. She is definitely a perfectly cast victim that is too sweet to harm—let alone be murdered.

Four Brothers is a revenge roller coaster that takes you on a wild ride until the inevitable end that you know was coming, but can't wait to see. The film is exactly like the trailers one has seen. Four dudes reunite in the “D” to find out who killed their moms and then put those killers six feet under. This is not a deep psychological thriller. Pretty much everyone in the city except the four brothers knows who killed their mom. The cops know. The folks in the hood know. And even the crooked lawyers and politicians know. That being said the quest for revenge for Evelyn is at all times enjoyable because of the great cast assembled for the main leads in *Four Brothers*.

What I liked most about *Four Brothers* was basically Marc Wahlberg. Without a doubt Marc was the heart and soul of the film. There are four brothers, but he was really the biggest and the baddest of the Mercers. He sets the tone from the second you see him cruising through Detroit's rundown and raggedy neighborhoods. Marc has “I'm Gonna Kick Somebody's Ass” expression written all over his face. He does not have the Ice Cube's menacing trademark snarl down, but he has his own unique mean stare. Marc basically acts like an upset, grieving son until he gets a whiff of a scent that his mother's death was not random-but rather intentional. But to be fair Bobby Mercer was always going to have smoked the alleged gang bangers, who supposedly robbed a liquor store and killed his mother. Whether they did it intentionally or in a state of panic. In *Four Brothers* it is never a matter of “if”, but when Bobby will catch his mom's killers.

What one can love about watching Marc's forceful performance in *Four Brothers* is there is no scene in the where you actually know what he is going say or do. Bobby is highly unpredictable and nothing shows this better than when he walks into a crowded inner city gym and just takes over. Bobby conducts an impromptu interrogation session with a whole crowd of hostile, loud and pissed off black basketball players and fans. Very few white actors could pull off this touchy, racial volatile scene in an urban film and you still end up wanting Bobby Mercer to do more outrageous shit. Without Bobby's fearless intensity this film would grind to a halt.

Tyrese still plays the same type of pretty boy, playa cocky character from *2 Fast 2 Furious*. But here it works perfectly because he is the type of muscle that Marc needs as he leads this "no justice-no peace" mission through the 'hood. Tyrese is willing to also do whatever it takes and take out whomever to get the job done. He has some playful and fun moments with Sofi a.k.a. La Vida Loca, his hot-tempered Latin girlfriend played by the sexy and lovely Sofia Vergara. Any audience will be busting up over the sporadic arguments and sniping between Bobby and Sofi and Bobby, Angel and Sofi. It was smart of John or the film's writers, David Elliot and Paul Lovett, to have some female presence around these macho guys. For Vergara this is a great step up from playing the airline hootchie mama in *Soul Plane*. With the right roles Sofia could maybe get to Eva Mendes status as the number one black male heartthrob in films. Or some more daring producer or studio will want to unleash all of Sofia's untapped acting potential. Sofia needs to be cast in part more dramatic and challenging than having sex with Tyrese on a washing machine.

And speaking of macho guys--actually only two of the four Mercers are stone cold killers and ass whoppers. Jack is a singer/rocker and reluctant mercenary. Jack suffers through a lot of dick sucking and gay bashing jokes from his Bobby. I have not heard so many "You like to suck c*ck" or "You must be gay" forced humor since I saw Nichlas Lopez's highly funny and dark Chilean teenage comedy *Promedio Rojo* at this years Los Angeles Film Festival. Today's films "you must be gay" is rapidly replacing "you're A Bitch" Garrett Hedlund probably played better parts in *Friday Night Lights* and *Troy*, but he still fits in with his other cinematic siblings. Jack has his useful moments in the film. But I can also imagine a list as long as a phone book of young white actors who could've played Jack Mercer as good or better than Garrett. There is no specific scene in the film that Garrett can say he stood out.

Andre 3000 or Benjamin smoothly plays Jeremiah Mercer. No matter if some folks keep bitching about rappers and singers becoming big time film stars. Andre is another case of a rapper jumping right to the big screen and fitting in comfortably with his co-stars who all have many more years of major film experience. You just cannot deny anymore the fact that rappers, like Ludacris, are becoming legitimate film stars faster than any legit or classically trained actors you can name. Jeremiah to his credit does not want any part in the violent crusade that Bobby, Angel and Jack want to lead against their mother's killer. But in the end Jeremiah steps up and proves he is a Mercer boy that will get his hands dirty and bloody. We will next see Andre stretch his acting skills in Guy Ritchie's *Revolver* and HBO's *My Life In Idlewild*.

As in *Shaft* where Jeffrey Wright turned in a stellar performance as Peoples Hernandez, John masterfully casts a great actor to play a great villain. You would never recognize *Dirty Pretty Thing*'s Chiwetel Ejiofor as Victor Sweet. There are about three classic Sweet scenes in the film that will become memorable and most talked about by brothers and sistas on the block. Some critics will give them away in their reviews. But I say watch the flick and just soak in all the tasty badness that Victor Sweet delivers. Just like Morgan in *Street Smart* and Samuel in *Pulp Fiction*. Or even Denzel in *Training Day*. Only bigger and better things will happen for Chiwetel Ejiofor after playing a major scene-stealing villain in *Four Brothers*.

What I didn't like in *Four Brothers* were all the loose ends. I mean if Evelyn Mercer's death was a set up at liquor store, then why didn't the police or the Mercer brothers question the little kid whom Evelyn was helping getting out of a shoplifting jam? The kid just disappears and would most likely be the last real witness to the hitmen that came into the store after he left. Did someone kill the kid? Was he in on the set up because it seems she only stopped at the store that night to get the kid out of a jam?

And how was Jeremiah going to make payments to Sweet without his mother's life insurance money? The fact that film clearly preaches that almost every cop in Detroit is corrupt should have meant that Lieutenant Green, Terence Howard, knew not to trust even his own partner Detective Fowler, Josh Charles. Bobby had not been town for years and he knew more about the case in less than a day than Lt. Green. I am so glad *Hustle & Flow* was released first and I saw the true range and depth of Terence Howard. His laidback, soft and naïve performance in *Four Brothers* would not let you know how capable he easily is of taking over a scene if not the whole film. That maybe why John had to have Terence dial his impressive acting chops down to let others around him shine.

The bad guy Victor Sweet is so obviously powerful in Detroit that it is never explained why he would feel so threatened by an elderly old white woman that he had to have her killed by professional hitmen. In fact, Sweets was highly offended that his crew hired "in-town" shooters instead of "out-of-town" shooters to bring less heat on him and his operation. Sweet did not at all seem like Evelyn could rattle him.

And urban films after 911 have a much heavier burden than past urban flicks. Having long broad daylight shootouts with masked men and automatic weapons should have brought out SWAT teams and every cop in Detroit. I don't care how whack Detroit's cops are portrayed. Or how many parts of downtown Detroit look beat-down and poverty stricken. Unless you show Detroit's 911 operators being paid by Sweet to ignore a flood of the panic stricken calls, how would ultra-extreme urban violence jump off during midday—even in Detroit—and not be thought as a terrorist attack. Things are not the same anymore. Studios and filmmakers alike need to step up and stop acting as if 911 never happened.

What could've been better in the film are not what film critics usually bitch about. The weak plot points, the lack of depth of characters, unbelievable action scenes, not enough of this character or too much of that one or John should make better films because he made *Boyz* long ago. You can go to Rottentomatoes.com and read any review that hates the film and hear the same basic complaints or "I hate John" "yada yada yada" tirades. Who cares about reading film critics saying stuff you could make up yourself. It takes real brains to know how to correct the flaws of a film or want to make the film better without turning the film into something else the studio or filmmaker never wanted.

So that being said what I would have done to improve *Four Brothers* is have had a simple and brief and dramatic conversation between Andre and his wife Camile, Taraji P. Henson. Jeremiah should be racked with guilt about getting involved with a massive and expensive downtown renovation project that needed Sweets approval or to be paid off first. Jeremiah should have known the consequences of his mother trying to help him out would lead her to getting hurt. There was no accountability on Jeremiah's behalf and no rational reason why he would not think paying bribes to Victor Sweet was not any different from Sweet being his silent partner.

Eventually, if Victor wanted a piece of Jeremiah's profitable real estate project, he would have just blackmailed Jeremiah for monthly protection money. Once the massive and expensive redevelopment was completed, Jeremiah would have no choice or watch it get burned to the ground by an arsonist hired by Sweet. There should have been a clear flashback where Evelyn told Jeremiah that if he did not stop dealing with Victor Sweet she was going to tell the cops and then the media about him making payoffs. Then when Evelyn tells Detective Fowler her intention of telling the media, Fowler tells Sweets. The ruthless gangster sees no choice, but to kill Evelyn off for either being an annoying nuisance or to send Andre a message that he was still someone he had to deal with or his family was next on the hit list.

Any scene or back story offering a clear explanation of Jeremiah's role in his mom's death could have been talked about briefly between Sofia and Taraji. That would have given them some more to do in the film. And made their characters more engaged in the plot besides just hoping their men come home safe. Sofia does play a small part in the final showdown. But it's really nothing to get excited about. The absence of any meaningful scenes for the film's lead women is an oversight. John or the writers could have integrated Taraji and Sofia more into the film's main plot without truly disturbing *Four Brother's* pulsating pace or non-stop action scenes.

If you are a hater of Singleton's films or a critic looking to tear apart any big budget summer action flick, then there is not a lot that John could have done to make *Four Brothers* better. It is an urban/hip-hop Western plain and simple. Mysterious strangers show up in a town ruled by fear and intimidation. The strangers refuse to bow down to the local bad guys. A bloody shootout can only be the inevitable outcome. Everyone except this generation of iPod and PSP raised teens knows what happens in any classic Western film or TV episode.

I mean how many times have you heard about innocent people or even community activists getting shot or killed in drive-bys, liquor shootings or accidental fires. We just never assume that these brave dead souls that dared to stand up to local drug dealers, corrupt cops or dishonest politicians would have actual avengers determined to seek immediate vengeance on all that played a hand in that activist's or community leader's death. John Singleton lets an audience feel empowered that if someone truly good like an Evelyn Mercer died a violent and unjust death, then it should be expected in some grand scheme of street justice that she would get four avenging angels to give her killers an unholy and unmerciful bloody payback.

Four Brothers is a runaway train of raw emotions and uncontrollable testosterone. It is sure to be a hit with John's loyal and ever growing following and something to hate for those that always want him to make another *Boyz n' the Hood*. John is definitely stretching beyond doing the same routine hood films. I even liked the fact that he took time to throw in film some fast paced hockey scenes on the ice as well as little black kids playing hockey in the street at the film's conclusion. These are small and invisible accomplishments to most mainstream critics, but will payoff later in his career. But no matter what you think about John you cannot deny leaving the theater thinking you did not have a good time with this new urban/hip-hop Western. I give *Four Brothers* my signature 4 Cheesecakes out of five. And if you are a die-hard Marc Wahlberg fan you won't be disappointed going to *Four Brothers*.

Sincerely,

David L. Watts a.k.a. Money Train