

## The Rider [15] 2017|USA|104 min

UK release date **14<sup>th</sup> September 2018**

Director **Chloé Zhao**

Screenplay **Chloé Zhao**

Cinematographer **Joshua James Richards**

Cast **Brady Jandreau** (Brady Blackburn); **Mooney** (Gus); **Tim Jandreau** (Wayne Blackburn); **Lilly Jandreau** (Lilly Blackburn); **Cat Clifford** (himself); **Terri Dawn Pourier** (Terri Dawn Jandreau); **Lane Scott** (himself)

Steve McQueen famously played an over-the-hill rodeo rider in Sam Peckinpah's *Junior Bonner*. Chloé Zhao's remarkable new feature is the equal of the Peckinpah film, albeit in a much quieter and more mournful groove.

She draws an immensely moving and subtle performance from her star, real-life South Dakota cowboy Brady Jandreau, whose character, Brady Blackburn, is partly based on himself. Zhao may overdo the magic hour shots – all those lovingly filmed sequences of Brady on the prairie with his horse at dawn or sunset – but this is a movie that combines lyricism, emotion and a brutal realism in an utterly beguiling way.

At the start of the film, Brady is recovering from a horrific rodeo injury which has left a gash on his head. He is a young man living in impoverished circumstances with his father and autistic sister in a trailer. Now, with a metal plate in his skull, it looks as if he will have to give up his dream of winning fame and fortune on the rodeo circuit. His best friend Lane is already in a wheelchair thanks to his misadventures as a rider.

What is most startling here is the sensitivity with which Zhao tackles such a downbeat tale. We see Brady briefly carousing around the campfire with his cowboy friends, drinking in bars and gambling at the slot machines. Generally, though, he is on his own. He is a quietly spoken, solitary figure who just happens to have a genius around horses. If anyone wants a wild colt tamed, they always turn to Brady.

Zhao includes several scenes in which we see Brady doing his horse whispering. She films these scenes without editing. Brady's expertise isn't feigned. The film has an authenticity that you don't find in even the biggest-budgeted, most exhaustively-researched westerns. It is also surprisingly moving – an unlikely tearjerker.

Brady knows that if he keeps on riding in rodeos and sustains another injury, he could kill himself. However, giving up means sacrificing the one part of his life that has meaning. "We have to play the cards we are dealt," his father (needless to say, played by his real-life dad) tells him. "Sometimes, dreams aren't meant to be". This is advice that Brady simply can't accept. He sees the way his father's life has unravelled since he stopped riding and since the death of Brady's mother.

Brady holds the film together. A youthful figure with hardly a wrinkle on his face, he looks very callow by comparison with the hard-bitten cowboys played by the likes of McQueen or John Wayne but shares their stubborn streak and their very laconic style of speaking.

The Rider is a modern-day western in which the machismo is secondary. It's an elegiac affair but one that portrays its troubled main character with extraordinary tenderness and insight.

**After: Geoffrey McNab, The Independent, 12 Sep 2018**

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