

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 164, No. 127

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

Del Toro shines as border-battling hitman in 'Sicario' sequel

Timely and brutal, 'Day of the Soldado' brings action without leaving viewers lost

Helicopters hover low over the desert, their whirling blades chopping furiously, creating truncated tornadoes of dust and swirls of confusion as searchlights zero in on desperate disoriented souls, running for the border, running for their lives.

Amid the melee, one of them kneels in a beam of light and lifts his eyes heavenward. Spreading his arms in a messianic gesture, he detonates the explosives strapped to his chest. Muslim prayer rugs at the site are the only clues to who he may have been.

Terrorists penetrating the U.S. at the Mexican border? In a storyline torn from the pages of the build-a-wall playbook, Mexican drug cartels in "Sicario: Day of the Soldado" help terrorists on the no-fly list enter the United States through Mexico.

Secretary of Defense Jim Riley (Matthew Modine) consigns CIA black-ops agent Matt Graver (Josh Brolin) to incite a war between the two cartels in control of the Mexican side of the border.

Riley believes the escalated danger and confusion of internecine conflict will weaken and distract the cartels, making it easier to stem their operations.

"Striking your enemy is a hell of a lot easier when they are fighting each other," explains Riley.

Graver gets the message. "If you want to start a war," he reflects, "kidnap a prince and the king will start it for you."

"Sicario: Day of the Soldado" is the story of that kidnapping.

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Because of the secrecy, cultural ambidexterity and sangroid required by the cross-border mission, Graver enlists the person he trusts most: the mercenary hitman — the sicario — Alejandro Gillick (Oscar-winner Benicio del Toro, "Traffic").



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The "prince" turns out to be a princess, Isabel Reyes (Isabela Moner), daughter of cartel kingpin Carlos Reyes.

Tough as she is smart, we are introduced to Isabel in the courtyard of her private school. Still wearing her uniform, she is at the center of a ring of identically outfitted schoolgirls who goad her on as she mercilessly beats down another student.

"She deserved it," Isabel explains to the headmaster who is

In successful stories of human suffering, the emotional bond between the characters is the lifeline that gives audiences the impetus to follow them through unspeakable travails.

In "Slumdog Millionaire," a boy overcomes every obstacle to rescue and reunite with his childhood friend. In "Life Is Beautiful," a loving father distracts his son from the horrors of a Nazi death camp.

In "Day of the Soldado," Alejandro, whose own wife and daughter were sadistically murdered at the directive of Carlos Reyes, is charged with safekeeping the child of his bitter enemy. Everything about this situation is fraught. And yet there is a bond.

Del Toro's heavily hooded hazel eyes, clear as smoke, carry the film. The world-weary Alejandro has few lines and he doesn't need any of them. Alejandro's vigilance, unflappability and grief are conveyed by Del Toro's great mastiff face.

An expert executioner graced with quiet authority, Alejandro's heart bleeds through, and we understand his desolation and glimpse humanity.

Del Toro deservedly gets top billing in the credits, even above Brolin.

"Day of the Soldado" does what movies are supposed to do. It immerses us in an unknown world — of cartels, coyotes and human contraband — without leaving us to drift aimlessly from gunfight to sword fight, car chase to battle scene.

Timely and brutal, "Sicario: Day of the Soldado" performs its mission with impeccable honor.