

The Dead Don't Hurt (2023)



Hoger, Vivienne & their young son. (c) Shout! Studios

Viggo Mortensen is both writer and director, as well as star, in this Western set in San Francisco and Nevada during the outbreak of the Civil War. As Westerns go, it is very unorthodox in that so much of it focuses upon the day-to-day survival of a woman left alone on the frontier.

The film opens at the end of Vivienne Le Coudy 's (Vicky Krieps) life as her husband Holger Olsen (Mortensen), watching at her bedside, closes her eyes. He then gathers up their young son and rides off. The rest of the film jumps back and forth from the present to the past, especially of Vivienne's French-Canadian past, with her father have been killed by redcoat soldiers.

In San Francisco the independent-minded Vivienne is resisting the blandishments of a wealthy French art collector when she meets Olsen on the street, A Danish immigrant carpenter, he immediately draws her attention, and soon San Francisco is behind them as they head for his cabin near the Nevada town of Elk Flats. She is visibly disappointed by the crudeness of her new home but settles in to plant a garden. She insists on her independence by refusing to marry Olsen. And, to insure she has her own money, insists on taking a barmaid's job at the town tavern.

The Civil War breaks out, and Olsen decides to enlist in the Union Army. Vivienne, powerless in dissuading him, is left to fend for herself on their small farm, her job at the tavern taking on greater importance. The town is run by the corrupt Mayor Rudolph Schiller (Danny Huston) and his crooked business partner, rancher Alfred Jeffries (Garret Dillahunt) The latter has a ne-er do well son Weston (Solly McLeod) who lusts after Vivienne. She resists his advances, but one night he violently rapes her. She becomes pregnant, giving birth to a son she names Vincent, though there is room for doubt as to whose son the boy really is.

With a son beside her, the reunion between Vivienne and Olsen is not the warm embraceable one we might expect after such a long separation. When Olsen finds out about her being raped, he quickly grabs his gun and heads for the door. He stops when Vivienne tells him that Weston had fled town after murdering several men. The three live in relative peace until Vivienne falls ill and dies.

Olsen leaves with his son in order to find Weston. The outcome I will leave for you to discover. Mortensen's film follows the usual arc of vengeance that we find in most Westerns, except for the extensive domestic sequences. The last scene in which father and son look out upon the Pacific Ocean is inspiring and hopeful, suggesting that despite their tragic past, the future lies open to them. This is a good Western for those who like to watch variations upon the traditional plot of such films. Whether the two, especially the father, is damaged by his dark past and thus will have to struggle against its effects is left to the viewers to decide. This is no *Unforgiven*, but it is well worth watching.

This review will be in the December issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.