

The Mule (2018)



Earl seems to love raising prize flowers more than his family. (c) Warner Brothers

Clint Eastwood may have made a fool of himself in front of the TV cameras years ago at the Republican Convention, but he is no fool behind or in front of a studio camera. His newest engaging film about an old man who becomes a drug runner is another “true story,” based on the New York Times Magazine “The Sinaloa Cartel’s 90-Year-Old Drug Mule” by Sam Dolnick—the author and Nick Schenk co-writing the screenplay.

Eastwood’s Earl Stone is a likable, almost 90-year-old scoundrel who has totally neglected his family. In the short prologue Earl skips his daughter Iris’s (Alison Eastwood) wedding so he can attend a Daylily association convention at which he is awarded a trophy. Such antics so alienated his ex-wife Mary (Dianne Wiest) that she leaves the room on the rare family occasions that he attends. Twelve years pass, and Earl and his flower greenhouse fall onto such hard times that the bank forecloses on his property. His granddaughter’s (Taissa Farmiga) wedding is coming up, but all he has left is his beat up pick-up truck..

Turns out that he and his truck are just what a Mexican drug cartel boss Laton (Andy Garcia) is looking for. Who would expect such an old geezer would be a mule, and so the trips from El Paso to Chicago, or we should say “runs,” begin. His task is simple, drive carefully to a motel near Chicago where

the cocaine is picked up, and an envelope stuffed with cash is left in the truck's front seat. Soon Earl is wallowing in cash, able not only to afford a shiny new truck and finance his granddaughter Ginny's (Taissa Farmiga) wedding, but also to bring back to life his foreclosed VFW Post that again becomes the hub of the social life of veterans grateful to him.

Meanwhile in Chicago DEA special agent (Laurence Fishburne) is making plans to stop the flow of drugs into his area. His team consists of Colin Bates (Bradley Cooper) and a second agent played by Michael Peña. The latter's lack of name is indicative of the sketchy treatment given to most of the characters in the film, especially the Mexican cartel members. We know that inevitably the team will cross paths with Earl and his ruthless employers.

Also piled onto the thriller tale is one of regret and reconciliation, Earl showing up for once when the embittered Mary lies dying in bed. The light comedy of the first half of the film gives way to both the drama of his trying to make amends for his years of neglect and for the dark threat that looms over Earl when the cartel comes under new leadership impatient with the stubborn ways of their gringo mule.

Neither Earl nor the movie seriously considers the ethics of transporting the deadly cargo that will ruin thousands of lives. Because it is Eastwood playing the crusty old coot prone to racial malaprops, we are led to root or and laugh with him. His saving the VFW Post from closure justifies his accepting the job. And of course, there's always the old excuse, "If he didn't transport the drugs, someone else would." Also, the injection of sex at a cartel party to which Earl is invited will titillate some viewers, delighted that such an old guy can still make out in bed. If you think that I am not recommending this for a religious discussion group, you are right. This is mainly for Eastwood fans.

Best scene in the movie because it is all too real. The DEA knows that the mule drives a black pickup, so they stop one driven by a young Latino. The terrified young man, fumbling with his seat belt, says to the agents pointing their guns at him, "Statistically speaking, this is the most dangerous five minutes of my life." Those in the audience who have kept up with news headlines or have seen either *The Hate U Give* or *Monsters and Men* will best appreciate what the young man means. Plus, this instance of racial profiling is exactly why the drug boss selected Earl to be his mule.

This review will be in the January 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