

**REEL CRITIQUE**

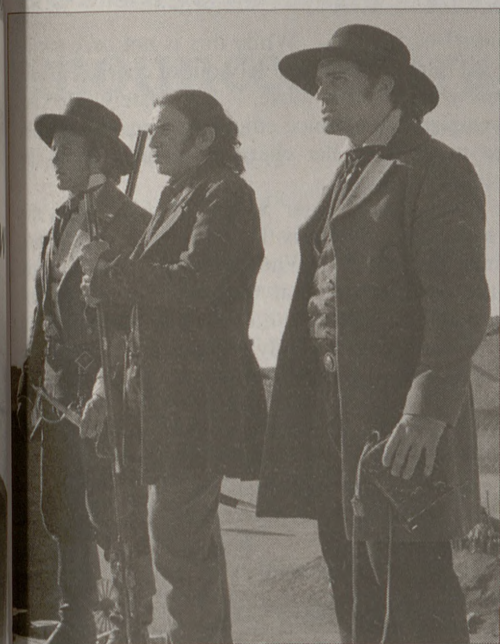


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**"The Alamo"**  
Starring **Billy Bob Thornton,**  
**Dennis Quaid**  
Touchstone Pictures

What can be said about "The Alamo" that won't fall on deaf ears? Most Texans will see "The Alamo" and enjoy what they see. Many may even clap or hoot and holler at the end. The recent cinematic portrayal of the famous San Antonio suicide stand, unfortunately, has the power to sweep Texas audiences up in a sea of approval that will regrettably blind them to the fact that the movie they are cheering so hard for is pedestrian and uninspired.

Anyone who has sat in on Texas history in grade school knows the heroic story of the Alamo: Mexico invites Americans to come and live in Texas. Americans move in and bring their slaves. Dictator Santa Anna takes over Mexican government and passes new changes, among them a government-mandated religion and the banning of slaves. New "Mexicans" disagree with new rules and want to take Texas for themselves. So, Santa Anna sends troops to quell rebellion and the battle eventually moves to the San Antonio mission, the Alamo.

The recent film gives a brief rundown of the background before moving into the days surrounding the 1836 standoff at the Alamo. It does a good job of introducing important figures in Texas history within the first few minutes of the movie. The director notably chooses to portray the legendary figures not as the demigods they have become in Texas history, but as real men, giving them the vices and weaknesses that help humanize them.

Sam Houston (Dennis Quaid) is an alcoholic who lacks the confidence in his men. Davy Crockett (Billy Bob Thornton) is running from a failed election and his own insecurities. James Bowie (Jason Patric) is a loud braggart of a man whose life is troubled by problems with gambling and alcohol. William Travis (Patrick Wilson) ran away from his family in another state to lead a battle with men who don't even want him.

Thornton's portrayal is the film's standout, and audiences are sure to end up caring about his final fate, which is arguably the director's goal.

The movie wasn't named "Conversations at the Alamo," though, and the real draw for audiences is the battle. The siege of the Alamo is a cookie-cutter example of how to make a successful war movie. Take one group of ragtag soldiers, add a dastardly villain, a bombastic score and a splattering of poetic shots filled with moderate gore and you have the fall of the Alamo. There is nothing new or original present in "The Alamo" and the final siege is no different. From the movie's theme score that sounds eerily familiar to the standard camera techniques, audiences will not see anything they haven't seen in "The Patriot" or "Cold Mountain."

There are a few shots that stand out. One memorable moment occurs when a young child is standing on a hill on the outskirts of San Antonio, watching cannonballs fly and soldiers battle for their lives in the mission like tiny ants. The movie makes no fuss about keeping its ending a secret — one of the first lines in the movie is "They are all dead" — so neither will this review. Travis' death is remarkable if just for the fact that there is a clear lack of attention to it. A single bullet ends the life of a character who the audience just witnessed write a letter to his son. This showcases beautifully the sheer anonymity of war. No matter how much a story focused on one character, Travis' death is just a fraction of the entire battle.

One of the most surprising parts of "The Alamo" is the lack of attention that went into humanizing the Mexican forces. The movie may have been set from the Americans' perspective, but there was absolutely no motivation given for the Mexicans' siege except in Santa Anna's hammy speeches that include everything but the evil laughter needed to make an arch-villain. Audiences are given a cold, ruthless portrayal of Gen. Santa Anna and no reasoning behind his advancing forces. It seems the director only felt the need to set up a villain that audiences could hiss at and gave no consideration to the fact that the Mexicans were merely trying to take back what was being stolen from them.

What audiences are given with "The Alamo" is a cash cow attempt to bank on the recent surge in patriotism. What audiences are not given is an original exploration into an epic part of Texas' history.

— Robert Saucedo

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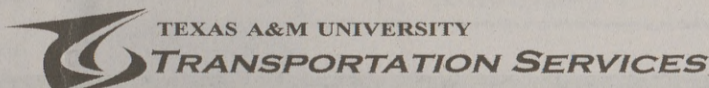
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