

'War Dogs' nails it with story, acting



By Howie Nave

Man, when did Jonah Hill grow up to become a serious, dramatic actor? I mean, he caught me off guard how good he was playing opposite Brad Pitt in 2011's "Moneyball" and opposite Leonardo DiCaprio in 2013's "The Wolf of Wall Street" but "War Dogs" solidifies it.

And just like in those roles he played in movies based loosely on true characters, Hill is so perfectly cast here it's almost uncanny. The year is 2005 and Jonah plays Efraim Diveroli, a stoner con artist who will scam anyone if it furthers his own well being. His latest adventure that of a small time arms dealer during the Bush-Cheney invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. His love of high powered guns in a wall sized poster of "Scarface" hanging in his office pretty much says it all.

Meanwhile, his former stoner school friend, David Packouz

(played by Miles Teller) is a massage therapist who has a baby on the way with girlfriend Iz (Ana de Armas) and realizes being a masseuse (and seller of bed sheets on the side) just isn't cutting it. Both friends reunite at a friend's funeral and after playing catch-up with one another find a common denominator: both love money.



Based on the 2011 *Rolling Stone* article, "The Stoner Arms Dealer" by Guy Lawson, scriptwriters Todd Phillips (who also directed), Stephen Chin and Jason Smilovic had their work cut out for them creating not just the backdrop of a real war but also creating interest in their leading characters of two friends in their early 20s living in Miami Beach during the war. Director Todd Phillips (who directed the three "Hangover" movies") did an

exceptional job too balancing the movie with both dramatic and comedic effects to keep your attention span intact throughout.

Phillips also paints yet another absurd vision of that war giving us a dollar sign percentage on how much it costs on average to outfit each American soldier in the Middle East. Apparently it just wasn't the Halliburton's who profited from the war but also smaller, enterprising businesses who could also profit by exploiting a little-known government initiative that allowed small businesses to bid on U.S. military contracts.

Problems start to arise with Efraim and David when their company starts growing faster than they can both handle it and Efraim starts to spiral out of control. The more pragmatic David (who actually opposes the war but not the money) tries to reel his friend in but is naive with the reality not just of his friend's past but of the shady dealings and people who profited from this war (including the U.S. government).

"War Dogs" works not just because the story is contemporary but also because of its interesting characters. In addition to the acting capabilities of both Jonah Hill and Miles Teller, the supporting cast is top notch with a fine cameo by Bradley Cooper showing up mid-movie playing one of those shady characters. Comedian turned actor Kevin Pollack is also excellent playing the Jewish owner of a chain of dry cleaners who helps fund the young arms dealers' endeavors in order to make a little cash and convinced he's doing it to help Israel. It's always cool seeing Pollack on the big screen because I knew him when we both attended Temple Emanu-El in San Jose and would cross paths on the comedy club circuit during his time in the Bay Area.

"War Dogs" is rated R for language throughout, drug use and some sexual references with a running time of 114 minutes.

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