



# Lincoln Film Society

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**Friday April 26th 2019**

## **The Rider (15)**

*dir:* **Chloé Zhao**

*Starring:* **Brady Jandreau, Lilly Jandreau, Wayne Jandreau**

*Sponsors:* **Richard and Linda Hall**

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**Synopsis:** South Dakota, present day. Brady (a young rodeo rider), head heavily bandaged after a severe injury following a serious fall, awakes suddenly from a dream about horses. He has been told by doctors he must never ride again. This leaves him feeling isolated from his community; family and friends are not sympathetic. Brady reveals an extremely gentle nature (a huge asset with horses) through his relationship with his sister (who has learning difficulties) and his best friend Lane, himself seriously injured after falling from a horse. He finds a job breaking in colts for a rancher. He decides to try riding competitively again but changes his mind after seeing his family. He revisits Lane in hospital.

For all its longevity and tradition, the Western is a genre that responds well to re-invention. Daniel Barber's *The Keeping Room* (2014) for example, is among the handful to be told from the female experience, while Patrick Hughes's *Red Hill* (2010) is one of many to transplant the template to modern times and other countries. And while Chinese-born writer-director Chloé Zhao hasn't attempted to turn the genre entirely on its head, her sophomore feature *The Rider* reshapes the traditional cowboy narrative in a way that both embraces and challenges western tropes.

The film is a visceral, organic experience, with landscape and action inexplicably intertwined from the outset. We first hear the wind as it whistles down the camera, which then opens in tight focus on a horse as it moves in slow motion, breathing heavily, kicking up the dust. Suddenly a young man sits bolt upright in bed, awoken from his equine nightmare. He is, as the title tells us, *The Rider*.

Or he used to be. As he removes the bandages from his head to reveal a substantial wound, the scar still jagged and raw, it's clear that twenty-something Brady Blackburn (real-life former cowboy Brady Jandreau, whom Zhao met while making her 2015 debut *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*) is in no state to do much of anything, let alone ride. And for a young man living in the heart of the South Dakota Badlands, this means that he has lost not only his income but also his identity. Worse, he has lost his masculinity.

As we can tell from the offhand way he treats his injury - wrapping it in cling film before taking a shower and venturing outside for lasso practice - Brady has an obstinate spirit that sees him vow to return to the sport that almost killed him: rodeo. As much as he tries to do the right thing - care for his sister Lilly (Lilly Jandreau), who has learning disabilities, or help with the rehabilitation of his best friend Lane (Lane Scott), who suffered



severe brain damage during a Rodeo fall - the pull of the ring stays strong.

That's as much to do with external pressures as with Brady's own adrenaline junkie-ism. In this spit-and-sawdust environment, where men are defined by their foolhardy fearlessness, Brady is now unsure of his place. This is beautifully evidenced by a campfire chat in which Brady's friends - many of them with their own scars, and all with their own injury stories - tell him, with a rough-hewn affection, to get back in the saddle. While such bravado skirts close to the realm of toxic masculinity, it is an attitude buried deep in the soil, and - as much as it's a curse for Brady - it's also something of its own balm. Perhaps, if it weren't for the jibes of his peers and his well-meaning father Wayne (Tim Jandreau), Brady would have less of the defiant spirit that undoubtedly helps him to heal.

That Zhao is a Chinese woman (she was born in Beijing, but now lives in California) perhaps gives her the cultural remove needed to explore the ideological grey areas of this well worn, overtly masculine genre. Yet that's far too simplistic an explanation for the level of craft on display here. The strength of her approach is in her expert walking of the line between fact and fiction. While she's working with real-life characters beautifully playing versions of themselves, and has constructed a narrative that rings with emotional truths (indeed, the film is strongly reminiscent of Lucy Walker's 2013 documentary *The Crash Reel*, which dealt with brain injury among snowboarding's elite), she also takes time to bask in the western's cinematic heritage.

Her expert partner in this is cinematographer Joshua James Richards, who last year turned in some stunningly evocative work on the British farming drama *God's Own Country*. He does the same here; framing the landscape in breathtaking traditional widescreen, the rolling hills and pink-hued skies suggesting limitless possibility; following Brady as he takes beloved horse Gus on one exhilarating final ride; capturing the colour and cacophony of the rodeo. Then, by contrast, he closes in tight on Brady scar, his anguished face, the beige, cramped Interiors of his family's trailer, the sterile, impersonal lines of Lane's treatment centre. Real life, son, ain't like the movies. Heroes sometimes fall.

And this is not only Brady's lament but that of an entire way of life. South Dakota used, once, to be the frontier; the cutting edge of possibility. Then it became America's heartland, a stable, dependable environment. Now it's a place of economic and social quicksand where, if they are not scratching out a living with horses, people toil in decaying beer joints and gas stations. Here, rodeo stardom is not just a folly, it's employment and escape - and the only one likely for local youngsters. When Brady finally sees sense and abandons his last ditch attempt to return to the saddle, he goes

straight back to Lane to watch old rodeo movies of the two of them in glorious action. It's a bittersweet moment, and acknowledgement both of triumphs past and a happy ending that, for many, will never transpire.

### Credits

<b>Brady Blackburn</b>	Brady Jandreau
<b>Lilly Blackburn</b>	Lilly Jandreau
<b>Tim Blackburn</b>	Tim Jandreau
<b>Lane Scott</b>	Himself
<b>Cal Gifford</b>	Himself
<b>Frank</b>	Leroy Pourier
<b>Tanner Langdeau</b>	Himself
<b>James Calhoun</b>	Himself
<b>Director</b>	Chloé Zhao
<b>Screenplay</b>	Chloé Zhao
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Joshua James Richards
<b>Editor</b>	Alex O'Flinn
<b>Music</b>	Nathan Halpern
<b>Sound</b>	Paul Know, Ben Gieschen

**USA 2017. 107 mins**

### Another View

A man rises up from a bed with a bandage wrapped around his head. There's a little island of blood and pus which has soaked up through the fabric. Without so much as flinching, he cuts away the dressing with a knife to reveal track-like staples running running like a crescent above his right ear.

This is Brady (Brady Jandreau, playing a lightly-fictionalised version of himself), a Zen-like Dakotan rodeo ace who is lucky to be alive having been stomped on by a wild horse that got the better of him in the ring. He appears remarkably chilled about what is clearly a dire situation, his first order of business being to skip the bed rest that doctors have urged him to take and get back to lasso practice.

Chloé Zhao's *The Rider* is a wistful ode to a lost America and to the folks who remain pointedly out of synch with the steady march of progress. Brady's dilemma is a pertinent one: does he risk life and limb to do the thing he loves, or does he get into boring lockstep with the traditional capitalist system? His dependents include a younger sister with learning difficulties (Lilly Jandreau) and a father with a gambling problem, for whom he dearly wants to provide. He shows no sorrow when visiting his old rodeo buddy Lane, now paralysed and unable to speak. They hoot along to online videos of the glory days, refusing to believe they won't someday be back on a bucking bronco despite their severe injuries.

Zhao's restraint is admirable, but there's a sense that the film is surging towards an inevitable end point where Brady will be forced to choose between a probably painful death and happiness, or life and eternal disappointment. And if there's any criticism here, it's that this tried-and-tested story arc doesn't really offer potential for big surprises. From the first five minutes of footage, you can guess exactly where this one is going to go.

Yet the film is blessed with a number of magical sequences, usually when Zhao's documentary instinct kicks in and she just observes as Brady weaves his equine magic. Sometimes that's just nattering to Lilly against the half-light, detailing the bright future he has promised her. Other times it involves his various interactions with horses which channel an aching desire to be cantering across the prairies once more.

Two sequences show Brady breaking in some rowdy colts, and the wizardry he performs is presented on the level of intricate brain surgery. It's almost as if he is silently communing with the animals and benignly bending them to his will. To complete the transaction, he needs to just hop on their back and ride them around the pen, but he knows his body can't take it any more.

While Brady blindly romanticises the ways of the Old West and the flinty demands of manhood, Zhao largely dismisses it all as macho bullshit. The film is about Brady developing a sense of his own mortality, and not being able to work with horses is, for him, its own type of slow death. In the end, Zhao suggests that only by living will we discover new possibilities, new hopes and new turns in the road.

There are so many individual moments here that are brilliant, and you might want to bet your life savings that this amazing director will deliver her first masterpiece sooner rather than later.

### Our next screening: May 3rd 2019, 7.30pm

#### Under the Tree (Iceland 2017. Cert 15)

In one of his novels, novelist John Buchan explained that to write a story, the author has to *'think of several apparently unconnected facts or events, and devise a connection. The author writes the story inductively, and the reader follows it deductively.'*

The set-up of *Under the Tree* follows this perfectly. The seemingly unconnected ingredients - a cat, a dog, a tree, a garden gnome and bickering neighbours - are combined to produce another gem in the growing treasure house of Scandinavian drama. Like *Rams* and (to some extent) *Of Horses and Men*, it's full of eccentric characters, dark humour, strange behaviour and a sense of the unexpected. If you are a fan of this genre, pull up a deck chair and enjoy ....