

Black Dog: Hot Mess with a Heartbeat

By Riemer de Vries

Black Dog (2024) will leave your face pulling itself into all manner of contortions, the film managing to be not only dramatic and violent, but also terribly endearing and, at times, unexpectedly hilarious. Protagonist Lang is reminiscent of, well, most Clint Eastwood characters in that his dialogue is sparse and his vibe effortlessly cool, a combination only pulled off by a lucky goodlooking few. More recently he might remind one of Hirayama in *Perfect Days* (2022), though instead of cleaning toilets, Lang finds himself wrangling stray dogs.

Lang's past is as tragic as it is vague and emerges through a series of admittedly clunky exposition dumps. He's a former local celebrity rockstar/motorcycle stuntman turned convicted murderer – the details of his crime remain nebulous throughout the story. After ten years of imprisonment, he returns to his hometown at the edge of the Gobi Desert, only to find it in ruin and neglect.



The fictional town of Chixia leaves one wondering what the hell happened to it, its barren streets and crumbling buildings reminiscent of grainy warzone footage or images of post-explosion Chernobyl. The truth is less dramatic, even if just as sombre – the city simply lost its use. Rapid modernization and industrial relocation left Chixia a preamble to a ghost town, with its quirky inhabitants clinging on to its final remains.

The most acute – or perhaps simply most solvable – problem is an epidemic of stray dogs terrorising the city's streets. One dark furred greyhound in particular is framed as an agent of chaos, it being the suspect in a series of rabies incidents. Lang, along with a ragtag gaggle of shadowy desperados is tasked with catching

and caging them, though it soon becomes clear that beneath his tough exterior hides a gentle giant, one who can't bear seeing any more creatures trade their freedom for a set of iron bars.

When finally the posse catch the black dog it's Lang who drives it across the desert, only for a storm to leave the two stranded in the cold and misery of this barren landscape. What follows is a friendship as unlikely as it makes perfect sense. Both Lang and the greyhound are destitutes amidst a crumbling world, searching desperately for their place within it. They're undesirables, castoffs, and it is in their shared solitariness that they find kinship.



There's more to the story, of course; a dying father, a vengeful kingpin butcher, an imminent eclipse, a roaming tiger – don't ask, and an indeterminate affair with a head-in-the-clouds belly dancer. But it's the bond between Lang and his dog that forms the ticking heart of the story. It is their partnership that provides a pulse to a confusing collage of half-finished story lines, oddball characters and surreal detours, bringing it together into something strangely human.

Black Dog is wonderfully weird, erratic and absurd and if not for Guan Hu's direction one might've even called it a mess. But it's the film's visual coherency and sense of place in this fictional yet all too real, barren yet all too lively city that keeps it from falling apart. Through all the vignettes and gags and dead-end story threads we get an image of a man as lost and aimless as the city around him, a relic of a past not long gone but gone all the same. What remains is to find some meaning in it all, a sliver of purpose in a world left behind.

