

*Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019)

Rated: R

Starring: Leonardo Dicaprio, Brad Pitt, Margot Robbie, Margaret Qualley, Julia Butters

Runtime: 2 hr 40 min

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About halfway through *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, a shaggy-looking man approaches the Polanski residence on Cielo Drive. Jay Sebring (Emile Hirsch), friend of director Roman Polanski and his rising star wife Sharon Tate, answers the door. “Who is it, Jay?” asks Sharon from the hallway, played in the film by *Wolf of Wall Street* star Margot Robbie. “It’s ok, honey. It’s a friend of Terry’s,” Sebring answers, clearly skeptical of the stranger standing in his friend’s driveway and eager to be rid of him. The “Terry” refers to record producer Terry Melcher, friend of Beach Boys frontman Brian Wilson and previous resident of the house. Viewers familiar with their 1960’s true crime history will recognize the long-haired wanderer as the infamous cult leader Charles Manson though never explicitly named in the film. The scene is based on real events in which Manson staked out the house, later orchestrating one of the most shocking home-invasion murders in American history.

If you’ve seen any of Quentin Tarantino’s recent films, you’ll likely guess that his latest is not a history lesson. Like 2009’s *Inglourious Basterds*, *Hollywood* features several real-life figures and mingles them with colorful characters of his own creation. Chief among them is Leonardo Dicaprio’s Rick Dalton, a fictional actor living next door to Polanski and Tate who is desperate to salvage his career as a leading man. The movie takes place largely over one long day in Hollywood, 1968, wherein Dalton tests his talents playing the “heavy” on a Western T.V. pilot called *Lancer* while his best friend and long-time stunt double Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) runs an errand for Dalton and through a strange twist, has a run-in with Manson’s cult of “hippies”. Meanwhile, Sharon, who we know from history will be killed by Manson’s disciples the following summer, attends a showing of her latest movie *The Wrecking Crew* on the down-low, listening in on the audience’s reactions.

Tarantino fans will have an idea of what to expect: smatterings of brutal violence, stylish needle drops, reams of digressive dialogue and a subtly winking, self-referential tone. The postmodern auteur has a reputation for cheekily defying the rules of story structure, crafting meandering tales which loop around on themselves from unexpected directions. He’s often more interested in texture and character than plot, and that’s never been truer than it is here; for much of its runtime, the movie has a disarmingly laid-back aura. It’s essentially a slice-of-life story in which the main characters simply go about their respective days, oblivious to the string of grisly murders the Manson Family will commit months later.

Dicaprio is a standout as Rick Dalton, bringing humor and vulnerability to the character. While on set, the washed up T.V. cowboy struggles to make an impression on *Lancer* director Sam Wanamaker (Nicholas Hammond) and his co-stars Jim Stacey (Timothy Olyphant) and young method actor Trudy, played brilliantly by twelve-year-old Julia Butters (*American Housewife*). During two lengthy sequences, we watch entire scenes of *Lancer* play out, simply to see Rick practicing his craft. While it

would be fair to criticize Tarantino for such indulgences, the set-pieces lead to Rick struggling to remember his lines, an important moment in his story. Throughout the movie, he attempts to redeem himself as a serious performer.

Pitt's Cliff Booth is a prototypical tough guy, a former Green Beret and superhumanly strong stunt-man who, during one flashback, gets into a sparring match with Bruce Lee (Mike Moh) on the set of *The Green Hornet*. Booth has skeletons in his past, though the film never reveals whether he's guilty of the crime he's suspected of. This, along with certain other events in the movie, paint him as a morally ambiguous character. All we know for certain is that he can hold his own in a fight and that he cares for his friend and employer Rick, who he encourages in the toughest of times. Although he's excellent in the role, Pitt's segments are where some of the film's minor flaws manifest: the Bruce Lee sequence is fun enough but brings the movie's already languid pace to a grinding halt.

One major strength of the film is its visuals and aesthetic. *Hollywood* is beautifully shot with rich, vibrant colors by Robert Richardson (*The Aviator*) and the production design by Barbara Ling (*The Doors*) is meticulous in its recreation of late 1960s Los Angeles. Tarantino and Ling, along with costume designer Arianne Phillips (*Walk the Line*) go above and beyond crafting a believable world for our characters to inhabit. The city and soundtrack are like supporting characters unto themselves; the tunes we hear throughout are a carefully curated batch of lesser-known pop hits of the time, and as the radio plays almost non-stop during the movie, the tunes are interrupted by real ads for products like "Heaven Sent" perfume, "delicious Mug Root-Beer," Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, and the Adam West *Batman* T.V. show.

Crucially, Margot Robbie is the heart of the film as the doomed Sharon Tate. She's not given much of Tarantino's slick dialogue, instead conveying more through eyes and body language. Her Sharon is an idealized symbol of a more innocent Hollywood, before the 70's ushered in darker and more cynical films by directors like Tate's then widowed husband Polanski (*Chinatown*). We primarily see Tate happy and carefree, just going about her day. Ironically, the movie's insistence on delaying the inevitable causes greater suspense, as the audience waits and wonders how the irreverent Tarantino can resolve her story in a way that isn't in bad taste. Suffice to say that he ends his film in a way that only he could, and indeed, the very final scene is perhaps my favorite he's ever written.

This is a lengthy and exceptionally slow-paced film that won't be for everyone. Its humor is subtler than in most Tarantino movies and it hones in on a very niche slice of pop culture history that some will find uninteresting. However, Tarantino's love and fascination for the subject is infectious and, for me, makes for a recent favorite, warmly recalled and revisited often.

9/10 stars.

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