

Django Unchained 2012



One of the great strengths of Quentin Tarantino's films is the way his love of cinema permeates every frame. From subtle, throw-away lines and in-jokes to more obvious nods (such as the "old fashioned" Columbia logo at the beginning or the '70s-style opening credits), it wends its way through his productions. Over the course of his career, Tarantino has paid homage to a number of genres; with *Django Unchained*, it's time for the Western. Of course, the director never does anything in a straightforward manner, so this is also a revenge flick and a somewhat offbeat comedy. Tarantino may be the best working director to take scenes of blood, mayhem, and gore and transform them into moments of hilarity. *Pulp Fiction* introduced this tendency ("Oh man, I shot Marvin in the face!") and Tarantino has honed it since. Despite the occasional brutality of the material, *Django Unchained* includes some of the best laugh aloud scenes of any 2012 motion picture, regardless of the genre.

Over the years, we have come to expect things from Tarantino, and he delivers most of them in *Django Unchained*. There are the high-octane action scenes, which tend to be short and brutal. There's copious gore; when someone gets shot, you can be damn sure he's going to bleed. There's a tendency for the director to thumb his nose at political correctness. We're bound to see female bare feet at some point. And there's a sense of energy and momentum that culminates in satisfying violence. Perhaps the only thing somewhat on the back burner in *Django Unchained* is Tarantino's

penchant for witty repartee and clever monologues. There's a little of it here, but not nearly as much as in some of his previous endeavors. Still, this is very much "a Quentin Tarantino Film" in every sense of the phrase and those who build expectations based on those four words won't be disappointed.

The movie opens in 1858 Texas with the unorthodox purchase of a slave, Django (Jamie Foxx), by a dentist-turned-bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz). Since Schultz doesn't believe in slavery, he soon frees Django and the two become partners in Schultz's business. After a profitable winter, they head to Mississippi where their goal is to locate Django's wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). When they succeed, they find an excuse to be invited to the plantation where she is being held. There, they are guests of the mansion's master, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), where their act bamboozles everyone except Candie's personal slave, Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), who smells a rat the moment he sets eyes on Django.

As has been true of past efforts, Tarantino coaxes memorable performances out of his actors. Joining the ranks of John Travolta, Uma Thurman, and Christoph Waltz (among others) is Jamie Foxx. After Ray, Foxx was viewed seriously as a dramatic actor, but he hasn't been given much of note to do in recent years. With Django Unchained, Tarantino provides him a meaty role and he tears into it with relish. He also displays a warm and unique chemistry with co-star Waltz, who is once again great. Leonardo DiCaprio, in a rare supporting role, shows that, despite his heartthrob reputation, he's capable of playing a truly loathsome villain. Samuel L. Jackson, buried under prosthetics and makeup, is recognizable primarily because of his voice and attitude. Tarantino's "reclamation project" (in which he takes a once-popular actor and gives him something interesting to do) is Don Johnson, although his screen time is limited. There are a few notable cameos: Jonah Hill, Amber Tamblyn, Bruce Dern, Tom Savini, Robert Carradine, and Franco Nero (who played the lead character in the unrelated 1966 film, Django).

One of the best things about Tarantino films in general and Django Unchained in particular is that the viewer is never sure where the narrative is going. Tarantino delights in unexpected surprises, some of which are sudden and violent. Consider, for example, John Travolta's death mid-way through Pulp Fiction - I'd wager no one saw that coming. While there's nothing quite that dramatic in Django Unchained, the movie has its moments and the storyline doesn't follow an unbending trajectory. Although it's technically a Western, Tarantino doesn't feel constrained by limits often placed on the genre. He stirs in elements of exploitation/blacksploitation to give Django Unchained a more pulpy, high energy feel. This is a serious movie with some serious things to say about how blacks were treated in the Old South but there's plenty of action to go along with the darker material.

Not unexpectedly, Tarantino inserts himself into Django Unchained in a part that's larger than a cameo and smaller than a supporting role. It's tough to say whether his acting has improved but he tries on an Australian accent that is ridiculously bad. However, the director may be self-aware enough to recognize his limitations in front of the camera and his appearance, distracting as it is, could be designed to be cheesy. Or not. Difficult to say.

Django Unchained may be Tarantino's most uplifting movie to date. Without revealing the ending, I can say it's less nihilistic than that of, say, Reservoir Dogs. Age may not have mellowed Tarantino but at least he can see the value in a little optimism. Django Unchained isn't in the absolute top tier of the director's films; I consider Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, and Inglourious Basterds to be more complete experiences. But this is a fine, accomplished effort and a great way to spend nearly three hours in a movie theater. Most people will leave with a smile and those who don't probably should have gone to see something softer in the first place.