

Review Redemption tale 'Two Men in Town' is an uneven mix

By **SHERI LINDEN**

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The setting is striking, the cast impressive. But "Two Men in Town," a drama that's built on dread and circles the question of redemption for a newly released prisoner, falls short of the mythic territory it aspires to.

Director Rachid Bouchareb's existential tale is an adaptation of a 1973 feature starring Alain Delon and Jean Gabin. A trim and tightly contained Forest Whitaker, in narrow tie and Malcolm X glasses, plays William Garnett, who has found religion during his 18 years of incarceration for murder. His Islamic texts and prayers anchor him as he reenters society, a loose term for the stark landscape of Luna County, N.M., where two government employees fight over his soul.

The first is Garnett's parole officer, the movie's most intriguing and believable character. Beautifully played by Brenda Blethyn, Emily Smith is a figure of tough love; as the dialogue unnecessarily explains, her philosophy rests on trust. But the popular sheriff whose deputy Garnett killed is as hellbent on destroying his second chance as Smith is determined to nurture and protect it.

A stilted mix of false geniality and single-minded vengefulness, Harvey Keitel's Sheriff Agati harasses Garnett at every turn. Glimpses of his compassionate side are no more than pointed attempts to make him complex. His inconsistencies are jarringly illogical, as is the swift trajectory of Garnett's romance with a bank employee (well played by Dolores Heredia).

In an especially unpersuasive moment, Agati weeps over the terrible fate of would-be immigrants from Mexico. The border that his county abuts, a no-man's-land of promise and devastation, is a key element in the story's symbolic formula, and like much else here, its dramatic power wanes as the fatalistic dance plays out.

'Two Men in Town'

MPAA rating: R for language.

Running time: 1 hour, 58 minutes.

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