

# St. Albert Gazette

## The battles of Humans and their Gods

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### Valley of the Gods

Starring Josh Hartnett, Bérénice Marlohe, Saginaw Grant, Steven Skyler, Joseph Runningfox, John Malkovich, John Rhys-Davies, Jaime Ray Newman, and Keir Dullea. Written and Directed by Lech Majewski

Stars: 4.5 / 5

One of this week's newest DVD releases is a real standout for the year: Polish writer/director Lech Majewski's new film set in the heart of America's red rock canyons in Utah. *Valley of the Gods* features solid actors in solid performances of a strange sci-fi thinkpiece about industry vs. heritage. Who would win between the richest seeking more riches and the Gods that they're up against?

It's a rare and beautiful film that takes race relations and class divisions and turns them all on their head by demonstrating more of what we all have in common instead of what keeps up separate.

Indeed, *Valley of the Gods* is a rare and beautiful film to watch, simultaneously meditative and confusing, inspiring and maddening. It's a must-see and a must-think. Watching it made my soul hurt and heal.

The real Valley of the Gods is a place nestled under the tall and red sandstone pillars in Utah. They're monumental rocks and the area is protected environmental land, or at least it used to be before the current American president changed the boundaries.

In the movie, the setting has more of a spiritual significance to the local Navajo community. The people struggle with economic self-sufficiency especially as it goes against industry and prosperity. There's a struggle for identity – a spiritual battle that rages on here too, and it takes on physical forms.

It reminds me of Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* for some of its strange symbolism and unusual imagery. It also reminds me of Kubricks' *2001: A Space Odyssey*, though not just because of the presence of Keir Dullea. There's an existential tone to the whole thing.

The story surrounds the sale of the Valley of the Gods to an industrial company called Tauros Engineering to mine the uranium out of it. To the Navajo, that would make them a lot of money but at the price of their soul too. Divisive and tempting industrial interests can promise economic supports, even riches, to those whose lands are being taken while those same people are forced to endure the ill health and other destructions as a result of the developments.

In the middle is John Ecas (Josh Hartnett), a writer who gets to tackle the biography of Wes Tauros (John Malkovich). As an actor, Hartnett was practically born in a brown three-piece suit with the tie pulled loose and slightly askew, permanent peach fuzz on his upper lip. If

there's an actor who can brood with hard luck, it's him. Ecas doesn't use a computer or a cellphone so the connection with the infinitely rich and tech savvy superman Tauros is a match made in ironic heaven.

Also, in the middle is Grey Horse (Steven Skyler), a troubled Navajo who wants the uranium mine to bring in wealth to his community, though his alcoholism and rage don't win him any friends. His elder Third Eye (Joseph Runningfox) speaks to the Gods directly and he knows that they aren't exactly happy.

Malkovich is always an elevating actor, especially as an eccentric billionaire – ahem, excuse me – I mean eccentric trillionaire who sneaks out at night to scrounge for apples out of back alley produce delivery boxes then sneak back into his super high tech ultra luxurious uber-mansion at the very pinnacle of one of those very pillars of red rock in the Gods' valley. His performance is spot-on as a man who is entirely out of touch and connection with the world he derives his riches from. For his part, Hartnett is in my view an under-utilized performer who is always enjoyable to watch. I think that his star should have risen much higher than it has by now. I wonder who he pissed off.

Director Lech Majewski's deft direction offers an approachable viewing of a speculative sci-fi-ish story of what real power really means. It will surely hold in your thoughts long after you're done watching it.



About the Author: Scott Hayes

Scott Hayes joined the St. Albert Gazette in 2008. Scott writes about the arts, entertainment, movies, culture, community groups, and charities. He also writes general news, features, columns and profiles on people.