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Author(s)	Robert Koehler
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**RIDE-BY SHOOTING:** Scott Caan, Colin Farrell and Gabriel Macht star in "American Outlaws," directed by Les Mayfield.

## AMERICAN OUTLAWS

A Warner Bros. release of a James G. Robinson presentation of a Morgan Creek production. Produced by James G. Robinson. Executive producer, Jonathan A. Zimbert. Co-producers, Art Schaefer, Wayne Morris, David C. Robinson.

Directed by Les Mayfield. Screenplay, Roderick Taylor, John Rogers, story by Taylor. Camera (FotoKem color), Russell Boyd; editor, Michael Tronick; music, Trevor Rabin; music supervisor, Maureen Crowe; production designers, Cary White, John Frick; art director, Frick; set designers, Ronn Basquette, Thomas H. Pall; set decorator, Barbara Haberecht; costume designer, Luke Reichle; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS/SDDS), Pud Cusack; supervising sound editor, J. Paul Huntsman; visual effects, Light Matters/Pixel Envy; visual effects supervisor, Mat Beck; special effects coordinators, Matt Vogel, Bruno Van Zeebroeck; assistant director, Bruce Moriarty; second unit camera, Terry Leonard; casting, Pam Dixon Mickelson. Reviewed at the Beverly Connection, L.A., Aug. 3, 2001. MPAA Rating: PG-13. Running time: 93 MIN.

Jesse James ..... Colin Farrell  
Cole Younger ..... Scott Caan  
Zee Mimms ..... Ali Larter  
Frank James ..... Gabriel Macht  
Jim Younger ..... Gregory Smith  
Thaddeus Rains ..... Harris Yulin

Ma James ..... Kathy Bates  
Allan Pinkerton ..... Timothy Dalton  
Bob Younger ..... Will McCormack  
Doc Mimms ..... Ronny Cox  
Rollin Parker ..... Terry O'Quinn  
Comanche Tom ..... Nathaniel Arcand

## 'OUTLAWS' FIRES BLANKS

By ROBERT KOEHLER

**C**onfusing a serving of beef-cake for real chow, "American Outlaws" sadly symbolizes the decline of the Western. The 36th bigscreen version of the exploits of the James-Younger Gang is one of the least convincing and most elementary, watered down to the consistency of pabulum and filled with clichés for today's auds. Though it doesn't differ from past accounts in its free-form manner of playing with the known facts about the country's most notorious and regaled outlaw band, pic kowtows to contempo viewers to a debilitating degree. This subservient need proves deeply corrupting, since there's a lack of commitment to re-creating the post-Civil War period and a fear of displaying too much of the pe-

riod's brutally violent streak for a PG-13 rating, which has rarely felt so restrictive. Even with Colin Farrell, currently on every studio's most wanted list, as Jesse, Warners isn't exactly giving this lame critter the big sendoff, an indication that distrib will quickly move it along to small-screen pastures, where it truly belongs.

There's a good argument that Jesse James and his circle of thieves have so long ago been made mythic — not least by Jesse himself, and in later years, by his testy partner, Cole Younger — that they're virtually

fictional characters, and ready-made for all manner of movie adaptation. And as shown by such variations on the James myth as the 1939 Tyrone Power and Henry Fonda starrer "Jesse James"; Philip Kaufman's 1972 "The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid"; and the 1980 "The Long Riders," with brothers Keach,

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**FILM**



## AMERICAN OUTLAWS

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Carradine, Quaid and Guest, the gang can be held up as a mirror to reflect the current state of the American mood for rebellion, while serving as a prime subject for the anti-hero movie with substance.

"American Outlaws," however, seems only to reflect a current apathy toward the Western. Pic begins with a Civil War battle scene that is meant to establish Jesse as the man of action, brother Frank (Gabriel Macht) as the man of thought and Cole (Scott Caan) as the man of strategy. But, these notions don't come across, except in a few glib, ersatz William Goldman exchanges between Jesse and Frank. And, the Rebel attack, led by Jesse, which helmer Les Mayfield stages here, does not look authentic.

Strained attempts to bond stylistically with Goldman's "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" continue with the use of pop music on the soundtrack while the boys go home after word of Gen. Lee's surrender — but using Moby's "Find My Baby," already ubiquitous on TV, is jarring

and doesn't have the same effect that Burt Bacharach's witty melodies did in "Butch Cassidy." Additionally, in a backbreaking attempt to appease P.C. interests, this cadre of Johnny Rebs includes a full-blooded Native American of few words named Comanche Tom (Nathaniel Arcand).

Unlike many James-Younger sagas, Roderick Taylor's story and script (co-written by John Rogers) establishes the context and motivations that led to the formation of the gang, starting with a visit by Rock Island Railroad suits and Pinkerton thugs to the James' Missouri farm. They threaten to take the farm through eminent domain if the James family does not sell it to them for \$2 an acre. It is just another way, as the James boys and Ma James (Kathy Bates) see it, for the Yankees to stick it to the Confederacy.

Meanwhile, Jesse cuddles up with his true love, Zee (Ali Larter), interspersed with enough visual evidence that these are, if not America's most compelling, then its cutest outlaws-in-training.

Once Cole is arrested shooting some Pinkertons, the hometown of Liberty, Mo., gets riled up, and Jesse and Frank mastermind Cole's escape from the gallows. What could be better after this than a good ol' party, which is also the setting for Pinkertons to firebomb the James place, fatally wounding Ma. It's war, to Jesse's way of thinking, and a return to Rebel guerrilla tactics, starting with robbing the banks holding the railroad's payroll.

On the other side of this Cliff Notes edition of the war after the War Between the States is Pinkerton himself (Timothy Dalton), calculating every effort against the outlaws like a chess move, and the haughty railroad owner Thaddeus Rains (Harris Yulin), who has little patience for Pinkerton's methods and even less for folks from "Podunk" who resist "the righteousness of Progress."

So as not to allow too much history of 19th century capitalism and states' rights to get in the way of our enjoyment, costumer Luke Reichle helpfully dresses these tweedy bad guys in black, up to their bowlers.

The only wrinkle in the extremely straightforward storytelling is allowing Pinkerton to feel some measure of admiration for his elusive adversaries, in the manner of gentlemen-warriors past, or at least, of Tommy Lee Jones in "The Fugitive." Dalton doesn't make this single kernel of dramatic possibility very interesting, however, even when he finally confronts the captured Jesse in a high-security prison, but it's worthy of Bret Harte compared with the limp conflicts between Jesse and Cole, which inspire nothing in Farrell and Caan but long, empty stares. After his magnetizing debut as a leading man in "Tigerland," Farrell takes several paces backward here.

Back home, Larter's Zee appears as if she's stepped out of "Baywatch," and indeed, when she marries Jesse and honeymoon with him on beachlike riverbanks, Larter seems to be in her element. A final action set piece, which has her and roughly half the state of Missouri liberating Jesse from Pinkerton's clutches, is both ineptly staged and an absurd try to turn Zee into Annie Oakley.

Threadbare production values dominate, most noticeably with the town of Liberty, which looks like a small wind could blow it over. Russell Boyd's lensing sensitively lights the beefcake, but otherwise lacks texture.