

Drug War Produces 'Savages'

By Saul Landau

Savage = Not domesticated or cultivated; wild

Oliver Stone's new film, *Savages*, is an attack on the drug war that combines the violence of *Natural Born Killers* and the political seriousness of *Wall Street*. Tentative it is not.

The setting is Laguna Beach, where mansions grow out of the cliffs overlooking the Pacific. One of them is shared by two handsome young white men who appear to be in their early 30s. Chon (Taylor Kitsch) and



Ben (Aaron Johnson), were surfer buddies in high school and have been best friends ever since.

Chon is a vet who did tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ben majored in botany and business at UC Berkeley. They share ownership of a marijuana production and distribution business that is super-successful thanks to some seeds Chon brought back from Afghanistan that produce weed that is 33% THC. (Anything above 16% THC is considered "top shelf" at California dispensaries. 33% THC is unrealistic.)

Ben and Chon also share a girlfriend, Ophelia (Blake Lively) whose parents bought her everything but neglected her emotionally. She goes by "O" and narrates the story. Chon, says O, is metal. With him she has "orgasms while he has wargasms." Ben is wood. With him she makes love.

Their ideal Hollywood ménage-a-trois gets interrupted when a Mexican criminal group — what the U.S. media calls a "cartel"—demands a share of their business. Their initial request for a meeting with Ben and Chon is accompanied by a video of a decapitation scene. ("Savages" is based on a novel of the same name by Don Winslow.)

The meeting is held and involves a teleconference with Elena, the Mexicans' queen-pin (Salma Hayek), who lives in opulence in a well-guarded compound south of the border. Our heroes request another 24 hours to consider her demands. Long-haired, gentle Ben wants to yield, but neatly-trimmed Navy Seal Chon wants to resist. They consult a DEA agent they have been paying off (a chubby, balding John Travolta), who tells them they can't prevail in a clash with the Mexicans.

Elena drives them to decision by kidnapping O and demanding 300 lbs of their primo weed as a sign that they're willing to cut her group in —plus a ransom for O's return. Ben and Chon are sent video of their girl, bruised and terrified in captivity.

They get the 300 lbs from fellow dispensary operators and make the drop in Chula Vista. "They can't love her as much as they love each other," Elena comments about their relationship. She doesn't know that



her top enforcer, the sadistic Lado (Benicio Del Toro) is drugging O into unconsciousness and sexually abusing her.

Elena softens and dines with her captive and displays her motherly side. (Salma's own daughter is keeping a low profile in Southern California.) O thinks about what



it might have been like to have had a mother who cared about her. Meanwhile Chon and some fellow vets with heavy weapons —joined by Ben, who has acknowledged the need for violence— ambush and kill couriers carrying cash for the "cartel," trying to come up with the ransom money.

In a particularly gruesome scene, a snitch within the "cartel" is being lashed to ribbons prior to being burned to death. He appeals to Elena (who is watching from afar) in the name of Magda, her daughter. This gives Ben and Chon the idea of finding and kidnapping Magda, and arranging a trade for O. Which they are able to do, again thanks to skills acquired by Chon in the U.S. military.

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Just as O has two lovers, *Savages* has two endings. In the first, O is brought by Elena and Lado to the high desert, where Ben and Chon are waiting with Magda. Chon tells Elena that Lado —who has secretly allied himself with a rival "cartel"— is a rat. She whips out a pistol to shoot Lado, who has

already drawn and mows her down. In the following shootout, everyone is mortally wounded and Chon expedites everyone's death, including his own, with injections from a military-issue syrette.

"That's how I thought it would end," narrates O. Then we get the "real" ending: John Travolta and the DEA sweep in by helicopter as O and Magda are about to be exchanged, and there is a bust, not a shootout on the high desert. Ben and Chon are identified as DEA confidential informants and walk. Elena gets 30 years.



In a sarcastic next-to-last scene, John Travolta, flanked by law enforcement agents and countless kilos of cannabis, explains that the DEA is keeping America safe from the scourge of drugs. O ends her narrative as she began it, walking along a tropical shore, with her two lovers surfing nearby.

Savages is no masterpiece. But given the vapidness of most teen-friendly summer movies, it's worth seeing. The characters are recognizable and fun to watch, and it has a point: the war on drugs is insanity.

This was one of the last reviews written by Emmy-award winner Saul Landau, who loved movies per se. His documentary Will the Real Terrorist Please Stand Up is available on DVD through Cinema Libre and streaming media via Amazon. Narrated by Danny Glover, it tells the story of "The Cuban 5," imprisoned in the U.S. for trying to stop terrorist attacks organized in Miami against tourist sites in their own country.