



[Shotgun Stories](#)

Patrick Z McGavin in Berlin

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Dir/scr: Jeff Nichols. US. 2007. 93mins.

A measured and sobering meditation on violence and discontent, distilled through a blood feud that ruptures two clans of half-brothers, Jeff Nichols' *Shotgun Stories* is a highly intelligent and accomplished first feature that makes palpable suffering, loss and the wanton destructiveness of vengeance.

Inexplicably passed over by Sundance, Nichols' film premiered in the Berlinale Forum. It is one of the most striking debuts by a young American director whose considerable power and virtues are exerted in the observational style of the storytelling, the superb production values that belie the low budget, the command and assurance of form, and the director's excellent rapport with a cast of largely unknown thought talented actors.

Produced by David Gordon Green - whose own movies, especially *Undertow* and the Sundance competition title *Snow Angels* this work triangulates - *Shotgun Stories* is a strong festival title that an enterprising distributor should yield favourable returns from discerning upscale audiences, particularly in home ancillary platforms where Green's debut *George Washington* flourished.

The lack of recognisable actors will hurt foreign sales, though French sales agent Coach14 is parlaying the film's strong Berlinale reputation.

The story's set in the American South, in the evocative region near Little Rock, Arkansas. Nichols has acknowledged the influence of Southern writer Larry Brown, whose short story collection *Big Bad Love* was previously filmed by Arliss Howard, and short story master Raymond Carver.

It is an Oedipal story in reverse. The plot tracks the bleak cycle of buried resentments, vengeance and retaliation that engulfs two sets of half-brothers violently opposed by their sharply different attitudes about their father.

Son Hayes (Shannon) and his two brothers, Boy (Ligon) and Kid (Jacobs), abhor their father's abandonment of the family, his embarrassment and disrespect seen as his refusal to grant his sons proper names. Their barely repressed anger surges at the contested man's funeral, where Son curses the man's name, an act that unleashes the fury of the father's second family, the group of four sons dominated by the hot tempered Mark Hayes (Smith).

Perched between Old Testament and Southern gothic, Nichols traffics in a classic theme, exploring how the past is superimposed over the present. He also examines the roots of violence, suggesting how the tendencies of Son and his brothers are grounded in class grievance and their discomfort at the rival family's privileged standing and greater social mobility.

Nichols' style is spare, poetic and antithetical to the typical forms of screen violence. Through his judicious use of cuts and blackouts, Nichols' staging of violation and pain is more suggestive and withholding than demonstrated, a quality that intensifies the sense of mourning and sharply captures a deeper feeling of loss and rupture. If there's a weakness to the script, the rival characters are insufficiently drawn compared to those of Son and his brothers.

As a physical production *Shotgun Stories* is a marvellously expressive work. The exquisite widescreen cinematography by Adam Stone uses landscape to both sharply establish place and a felicitous internal projection of the characters' anguish and confusion. Green's editor Steven Gonzales works in the same capacity here, creating an effectively lean and chiseled work.

The music by Ben Nichols and his Southern rock band, Lucero, is tangy and volatile. Shannon (the gung ho marine from Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*) is the standout of the large cast, his strength and reserve clearly expressing what make words wholly redundant, his character's sense of purpose and family protector. He embodies a story that provides no easy escape.

Production companies/backers

Upload Films
Muskat Film Properties
Lucky Old Sun

International sales

Coach14

Producers

David Gordon Green
Lisa Muskat
Jeff Nichols

Executive producers

Todd Williams
Nick Thurlow
John Portnoy

Cinematography

Adam Stone

Editor

Steven Gonzales

Production design

Lindsay Millar

Music

Ben Nichols
Lucero

Main cast

Michael Shannon
Douglas Ligon
Barlow Jacobs
Michael Abbott, Jr
Travis Smith
Glenda Pannell
Natalie Canerday