

Little Big Man

By Kimberly Lindbergs

Few film genres have captured the imagination of movie audiences with the same kind of power and persuasiveness as the American western. For decades Hollywood mixed facts with fiction and created a kind of celluloid mythology that made heroes out of cowboys, would-be settlers and the U.S. Cavalry. This myth-making led to the vilifying of Native Americans but in 1970 that changed.

“Little Big Man” (1970) chronicles the long and troubled history of Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman), a 121-year-old man whose family was killed by the Pawnee Indians when he was only 10.

He’s saved by the Cheyenne (longtime enemy of the Pawnee) who raise him as one of their own tribe members. Jack comes to love and respect the Indians who refer to themselves as “human beings.” Throughout the film Jack is torn between two worlds. The world of white men who are often depicted as religious hypocrites, murderous gunslingers, racist brutes and money hungry capitalists willing to do anything in order to make a buck. And the more earth conscious world of the Native Americans who are trying to survive while their own way of life, identity and human dignity is being stripped from them by the U.S. Government.

If my description of the film seems heavy-handed it’s because “Little Big Man” is often a very heavy-handed film. Director Arthur Penn wasn’t interested in merely making a movie that challenged the way that Hollywood had mythologized the history of the American west. Penn was also responding to the war in Vietnam that had led to well-publicized atrocities such as the My Lai Massacre. He had never shied away from showing violence in his films before but the relentless brutality depicted in “Little Big Man” bothered some of the nation’s leading critics. The movie detailed an ugly and little seen side of war including the killing of innocent civilians, unarmed mothers and their children but it didn’t stop



Mrs. Pendrake (Faye Dunaway) bathes Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman). Courtesy Library of Congress collection.

there. Indians were shown killing one another, children murdered adults and animals were brutally slaughtered by fur trappers for mere profit.

Penn shot “Little Big Man” on location with help from cinematographer Harry Stradling Jr. and their use of historic sites such as Little Bighorn as well as the use of actual reservations in Montana gave the film a realistic edge that was rarely seen in previous depictions of the west. Penn clearly enjoyed playing with the public’s perception of historical events in films like “The Left Handed Gun” (1958) which focused on the outlaw Billy the Kid and in his critically acclaimed film “Bonnie and Clyde” but “Little Big Man” was a more urgent and angry movie. It illustrated an epic tragedy of immeasurable proportions but still managed to be one of the director’s most entertaining and personal films.

The film also provided its star, Dustin Hoffman, with one of his most challenging roles. Hoffman had become a popular counter-culture figure thanks to parts in memorable movies like “The Graduate” (1967) and “Midnight Cowboy” (1969). His impressive acting skills, short stature, self-deprecating humor and universal appeal had made him a worldwide star who didn’t fit neatly into Hollywood’s idea of a typical leading man. The role of “Little Big Man”

seemed tailor-made for Hoffman and he is unforgettable as Jack Crabb. Unlike many films that turned their leading men into heroic outsiders who lead the Native Americans out of danger, Hoffman's character is a fumbling, weak-willed anti-hero who rarely succeeds at anything that he attempts to accomplish. The 33-year-old actor had to age 88 years in the movie which was achieved by using the services of skilled makeup artist Dick Smith. Hoffman also spent an hour screaming at the top of his lungs before shooting so his voice would sound as ragged as he looked. As good as Hoffman is in "Little Big Man", his extraordinary performance in the film is occasionally eclipsed by his costars.

Faye Dunaway is well cast as a reverend's wife who turns to prostitution after her husband dies and Martin Balsam does a terrific job of playing a resilient con man. I also enjoy Jeff Corey's portrayal of Wild Bill Hickok and Kelly Jean Peters is very good as Hoffman's Swedish wife. One of the film's most memorable performances is delivered by Richard Mulligan who plays General George Armstrong Custer. Mulligan was a brilliant comic actor who depicted General Custer as an egocentric madman hell-bent on the destruction of the American Indians. In previous films Custer was often presented as an untarnished hero but Mulligan's crazed performance gave the public a very different version of Custer to consider.

What really set the movie apart from so many previous westerns was its depiction of Native people. The Cheyenne are not merely noble savages or blood-thirsty Braves in "Little Big Man". The tribe that raises Hoffman's character is made up of gay Indians

(Robert Little Star), angry lunatics (Cal Bellini) and sexually motivated squaws (Aimée Eccles, Emily Cho, Linda Dyer). These would have been fringe characters in any Hollywood film made in 1970 but their appearance in a western was truly groundbreaking. "Little Big Man" humanized Indians in a way that few Hollywood films had dared to and they suddenly seemed as complex and divided as their white brothers and sisters. They were our neighbors, our friends and family members.

If a film can have a soul, that part was played by Chief Dan George who portrayed Dustin Hoffman's adopted grandfather Old Lodge Skins. Originally actors as diverse as Marlon Brando and Lawrence Olivier had been considered for the role but thankfully they turned it down. Hollywood had rarely employed actual Indians but Chief Dan George was the real Chief of the Burrard Band of North Vancouver in British Columbia. He brought his personal experience to the role and gave a voice to Native Americans everywhere. His sensitive portrayal of Old Lodge Skins won the hearts and minds of moviegoers around the world and he was nominated for many awards including an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Kimberly Lindbergs is a freelance writer and occasional graphic/web designer based in Napa, California. She currently writes for Turner Classic Movies and writes a blog called Cinebeats. <https://cinebeats.wordpress.com/contact/>