

# Blazing Saddles

By Michael Schlesinger

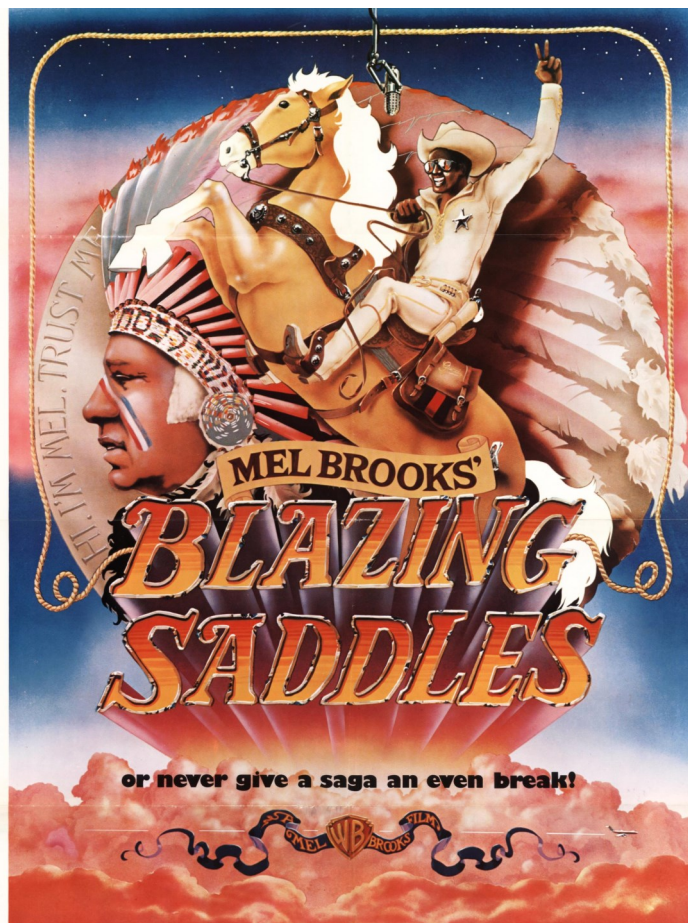
It's often a sign that a genre has come to the end of the line when a parody becomes a hit. "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein" was the nail in the coffin of the traditional monster movie. "Airplane!" crashed the all-star disaster epic. And the western was already bleeding in the street when "Blazing Saddles" came along. After that, the studios were pretty much out of the oater business, and there was nothing left to do but sit shiva.

To be sure, there had been comedy-westerns since almost the beginning; everyone from Roscoe Arbuckle to Don Knotts had strapped on the ol' six-shooter at least once. And there had been genuine satires as well, notably "Cat Ballou" and the various Burt Kennedy spoofs, particularly "Support Your Local Sheriff." But "Saddles" was in a class by itself. The affection for the genre was as palpable as it was in those previous films, but there was a different sensibility on hand: raucous, uninhibited, vulgar, and definitely Borscht Belt. Plus a surprising lesson on race relations. Quite a lot for a modestly-budgeted picture with even more modest expectations.

Although he was a major comedic force on TV, records and elsewhere, Mel Brooks hadn't had much success on the big screen. Yes, "The Producers" won a Screenplay Oscar, but it was still mostly a cult favorite. "The Twelve Chairs," released by a small indie, barely made a ripple. But John Calley, whose reign at Warners in the early 70s resulted in a boatload of classic films, took a shine to Brooks' concept and gave him enough rope, so to speak.

Actually, said concept originated with Andrew Bergman, who called it "Tex X" (as in Malcolm X). Bergman had written a book, "We're in the Money," about Warner Bros. films of the 1930s, and clearly saw the Errol Flynn western "Dodge City" as his starting point. He would simply take things one step further: the Aussie sheriff would now be black, the barroom brawl would break through not to the next building but the next soundstage, and so on. (And both Bruce Cabot and Harvey Korman bear the same WTF? expression when they open a door and behold the fracas in progress.) Brooks assembled a team of writers—including Richard Pryor, whom he intended to star—and not unlike the old days of "Your Show of Shows," jokes flew in all directions as the script took shape. The title, deemed a little too oddball, was changed to "Black Bart."

Casting proved tougher. Pryor's unreliability—due primarily to his legendarily prodigious drug consumption—rendered him a no-go; a search for a new sheriff (how's



"BLAZING SADDLES" Starring CLEAVON LITTLE · GENE WILDER · SLIM PICKENS · DAVID HUDDLESTON · CLAUDE ENNIS STARRETT, JR. Also Starring MEL BROOKS · HARVEY KORMAN and MADELINE KAHN · Screenplay by MEL BROOKS · NORMAN STEINBERG · ANDREW BERGMAN · RICHARD PRYOR · ALAN UGER · Story by ANDREW BERGMAN · Produced by MICHAEL HERTZBERG · Directed by MEL BROOKS · PANAVISION® TECHNICAL® · R · RESTRICTED · From Warner Bros. A Warner Communications Company

*Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.*

that for irony?) eventually yielded stage and TV star Cleavon Little. Gene Wilder passed on the role of drunken gunfighter The Waco Kid, so Gig Young was hired; the first day of shooting, he collapsed from alcohol abuse. Brooks frantically called Wilder in New York and asked him to reconsider; the actor wisely flew out the next day. Much of the supporting cast would become a kind of Brooks stock company, including Korman, Madeline Kahn, Dom DeLuise (and his wife, Carol Arthur), Liam Dunn, David Huddleston and Robert Ridgeley. For authenticity, he added Slim Pickens and Burton Gilliam, and then cheekily gave himself two speaking parts, a third gag cameo and some looping. He also offered a role to John Wayne, because why not? The Duke declined, not wishing to appear in what he felt was a "dirty movie," but told Mel he'd be first in line opening day. (History has not recorded if he actually did see it.)

Newly retitled "Blazing Saddles"—"blazing" being a popular word in B-western titles—it needed a finishing touch: a whip-cracking title tune sung by a Frankie Laine-type (he'd been the go-to guy for western themes in the 50s).

"Why not actually get Frankie Laine?" someone sagely suggested, and so they did. Brooks conveniently neglected to tell him it was for a comedy, and the crooner sang his heart out while Mel and the others stifled their laughter. But the conviction he brought to the number is what made it work: it received an Oscar nomination for Best Song, and Laine even got to perform it at the ceremony. Sadly, it lost to the love theme from "The Towering Inferno." (Anyone remember it? I thought not.) Kahn's uproariously lisping Dietrich-esque chanteuse also nabbed a nomination; alas, Korman's on-camera resolve to win one did not pan out, though it did become his most enduring movie role—to this day, the very mention of Hedy Lamarr almost always guarantees a response of "That's *Hedley!*"

The Warner execs were appalled by the picture's "bad taste" and demanded numerous cuts. After they left, Calley wryly told Brooks, "Good notes," and released it untampered. It opened to wildly mixed reviews, but the public adored it; it ran for weeks, in some theatres months, and was frequently brought back to plug the hole when a new film flopped. It became the biggest-grossing western to date (and still is if adjusted for inflation), and earned Brooks the movie career he'd been hoping for. (He was already in production on "Young Frankenstein," which was released at the end of that year—a one-two punch few directors in the modern era have duplicated.) And despite its constant availability on cable-TV and countless video formats, barely a month goes by that it isn't showing at a revival cinema somewhere.

So what is it about "Blazing Saddles" that makes it such a delight that people can watch it over and over again, to the point where they could recite the dialogue along with the actors? Well, a great deal of it is due to the script's brilliant construction: no matter how ridiculous the gag is, it's generally rooted in the storyline. Everyone in town is named Johnson? Of course—they're so white-bread they're practically *inbred*. Howard Johnson's ice cream parlor has only one flavor? Hey, back then Butter Pecan wasn't even a dream. The infamous campfire scene where a bunch of cowpokes sit around breaking wind? Well, wouldn't *you* after downing a gigantic pile of beans? (Little-known fact: All the fart sounds were made by Mel himself blowing raspberries.) And just where does that music come from? Oh, it's the Count Basie Orchestra, conveniently situated just off-camera. Somehow it all makes sense.

Even Huddleston's line, "We'll give some land to the niggers and the chinks—but we don't want the Irish!" is historically accurate: in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Irish were one very slight step above all the other immigrant minorities. (It must be noted here that the frequent use of the n-word is vital to depicting the racism of the townspeople, but when some networks telecast the film, it's bleeped out, thus defeating the purpose. Indeed, Brooks has frequent-

ly declared that the picture could never be made today—the PC police would pounce all over him.)

One scene flashes back to Little's family as part of a wagon train attacked by Indians. The Chief (Brooks, speaking Yiddish) spares them: "Dey darker den *us!*" It's a race mash-up no one had ever thought of, and it plays right into the bigotry theme—if there's any minority that's had it worse than blacks, it's Native Americans. (In a weird little fluke, the stock footage of the attack comes from "Hondo," and it's second-unit footage ghost-directed by John Ford—making "Saddles" the only film that could be said to have been co-directed by Mel Brooks and John Ford!)

Mel threw caution to the winds: anachronistic jokes abound, the fourth wall is not so much broken as shattered, at least two Little break-ups are left in, two of the cowboys in the climactic brawl look and sound suspiciously like Bill Holden and Ben Johnson in their "Wild Bunch" garb, and even Hitler turns up (actually, an actor playing him: "They lose me after the bunker scene."). And the dialogue is so thoroughly quotable it even turns up in Clint Eastwood's "The Rookie." (Entering a darkened warehouse with gun drawn, cop Charlie Sheen calls out, "Candygram for Mongo," referencing a wacky scene with the musclebound goofball played by Alex Karras.)

And last but certainly not least, it's also astonishingly prescient: the residents' reaction to their new black sheriff eerily mirrors what would happen 35 years later when Barack Obama became President.

"Blazing Saddles" may not be Brooks' "best" film—"Young Frankenstein" is more handsomely produced—but it's likely the one he'll be most remembered for. Plus he's been tantalizing us for years with the possibility of a Broadway musical. But even if that fails to materialize, we will always have the movie, to brighten our darkest mood, to lift our heaviest spirits, and just plain remind us that there's no finer way to spend 94" than to be convulsed in the kind of helpless, incessant laughter that is the hallmark of the comedy deity that is Mel Brooks.

And if nothing else, it ain't the first act of "Henry V."

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

*Michael Schlesinger is widely acknowledged as the dean of classic film distributors, having spent more than 25 years at MGM, Paramount and Sony, keeping hundreds of vintage movies in theatrical release (and later DVD). He oversaw the completion of Orson Welles' "It's All True," wrote and produced the American version of "Godzilla 2000," co-produced such Larry Blamire parodies as "The Lost Skeleton Returns Again" and "Dark and Stormy Night," and has written, produced and directed several shorts featuring the faux-1930's comedy team of Biffle & Shooster.*