

## Rio Bravo

By Michael Schlesinger

There's a little-known micro-genre I've dubbed "testament films." They're made late in a director's career, when he gathers up all his favorite character types, plot threads, themes and personal tics and melds them into one big cinematic Greatest Hits album. Often they're made because the filmmaker feels he's losing touch and wants to retreat to safe ground, especially if he's had one or more flops. Or perhaps he believes the end of his career is nigh and wants to make one really big final splash. But whatever the rationale, they often turn out to be some of their finest works; e.g., Hitchcock's "North By Northwest," DeMille's "The Ten Commandments," Welles' "Chimes At Midnight" and Wilder's "One Two Three." John Ford managed two: "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" and "Cheyenne Autumn."

And of course Howard Hawks' "Rio Bravo." From *Variety's* infamously patronizing "one of the better class oaters of the year" to Robin Wood's stunning "the one film that justifies the existence of Hollywood," this low-key, amiable western has been delighting and confounding people in equal measure for over 55 years. Maybe the most accurate description comes from Molly Haskell, who likens it to an old friend you always look forward to seeing again—perhaps because you've seen so much of it before.

Hawks was usually more interested in exploring relationships among his characters—his fascination with the group dynamic was practically a trademark—than the niceties of the plot. (Remember that no one knows who kills one character in "The Big Sleep.") Archetypes abound: the strong but vulnerable hero, the tough—and tough-talking—woman, the flawed character needing redemption, the comic-relief sidekick (often Walter Brennan or someone of that ilk), the intellectual who should be taken down a peg, and so on. Hawks used them almost as Lego pieces, to the point that exposition often became unnecessary. Bits and lines were often recycled from his earlier films, and (*pace* J.K. Simmons) "Good job" really was a compliment. For a guy who didn't fancy himself an auteur, his signature is one of the most clearly visible in film history, and seldom more so than in this glorious *chef d'oeuvre*.



*Ricky Nelson's guitar playing doesn't seem to impress John Wayne. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

In 1955, Hawks was running for the tall grass. He'd tried something different—the Biblical epic "Land of the Pharaohs"—and laid a goose egg. (He later said that he didn't know how a Pharaoh talked—death indeed for a director whose films are renowned for their witty dialogue.) Approaching 60 and not accustomed to failure, he took years off to wander the desert (actually France) and figure out what to do next. When he returned in 1958, he noticed the plethora of westerns on television. The answer was instantly obvious.

As a conservative, Hawks was annoyed by "High Noon," believing that no self-respecting sheriff would go around begging for help. What was needed was a sheriff who thought he didn't need assistance from amateurs—and who better to play such a man than old pal John Wayne? Starting with an outline by daughter Beverly (billed under her married name, B.H. McCampbell), he rounded up trusty screenwriters Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett to hammer out a script; they put a spin on the idea by making the Duke's character flawed enough that he needed help at every turn from the very people he felt weren't up to it. Hawks, who saw the wisdom and humor in this concept, ran with it.

Always with an eye toward the box office—and noting how popular the tube had become—he loaded the cast with what were derided at the time as "TV actors"—Ricky Nelson, Walter Brennan (then starring in "The Real McCoys"), Ward Bond (ditto

“Wagon Train”), John Russell and Claude Akins. Angie Dickinson, who had mostly toiled in TV guest spots and a few smaller films, was awarded the female lead, and Wayne’s mascot Pedro Gonzales-Gonzales got his usual comic Mexican foil. And then there was Dean Martin (still emerging from the shadow of Jerry Lewis), who had just established his dramatic chops in “Some Came Running” and “The Young Lions.” His casting as the drunk deputy proved to be not only a career high point but also cemented his affable persona of a man with an enormous fondness for distilled beverages.

For a western, especially one that runs a generous 141”, there’s very little action until the climax. What there *is* is talk, and lots of it: almost always absorbing, amusing or observant. And yet it’s one of Hawks’ droll pranks that the opening scene has no dialogue at all...but it sets the tale in motion with succinct precision. (Sheriff Wayne arrests the no-good brother of a powerful rancher, who’ll stop at nothing to get his murderous sibling out of the clink; the sleepy little town quickly turns into something approaching a war zone, and the odds are ugly. Bond: “A game-legged old man and a drunk. Is that all you got?” Wayne: “It’s *what* I got.”)

Contrasted to his previous western, “The Searchers,” Wayne is wonderfully relaxed and in fine humor—there’s a moment where he’s walking away and Angie gives him a parting zinger. He stops for a moment and tenses up; even though his back is to us, we can still “see” the irritation on his face. This extends into the one scene that is frequently criticized: the interlude in which Dino and Ricky—and later Brennan—sing (no doubt an excuse to sell records). But as Wood points out, the “flawed” sidekicks find unity in music, while the Duke can only look on, excluded by his “completeness.” It’s actually quite charming, and amusingly, “My Rifle, My Pony and Me” is merely Dmitri Tiomkin’s theme for the previous Hawks/Wayne epic, “Red River,” with lyrics added. (Apparently Hawks didn’t hold “High Noon” against him.) Oddly, the “Deguello,” the haunting trumpet melody that signals “no quarter,” became far more fa-

mous, and Wayne liked it so much he reused it in “The Alamo” the following year.

The film was a huge hit, yet as is so often the case, it was up to Peter Bogdanovich and the French to recognize it as more than just “another John Wayne western” and place it in the proper context of Hawks’ career. But six years later, Hawks once more left his comfort zone and came a cropper with the “youth-oriented” racing drama “Red Line 7000.” Again scrambling for safety, he and Brackett reworked “Rio Bravo” by using all the alternate ideas they’d saved up. Duke was now teamed with Robert Mitchum (drunk), James Caan (kid), Arthur Hunnicutt (old coot) and Ed Asner (evil ranch owner), and the result, “El Dorado,” is sort of the “Godfather II” of westerns: taking the elements of its predecessor and rejiggering them into an equally deep and rich picture; buffs love to debate which is better. They went to the well one more time with “Rio Lobo,” which is—not unlike “Godfather III”—flawed but still worthwhile. (And in 1976 John Carpenter made a modern version, “Assault On Precinct 13.”) But it’s this original that sums up Hawks’ career so completely and captivatingly.

It’s often said that “Rio Bravo” is an anomaly among “big” westerns: talky, slow, self-indulgent, too light-hearted but not actually a comedy. All of that is pretty much true—but what the naysayers fail to grasp is that it’s precisely those qualities that make it such a wildly enjoyable film. Some folks think it’s the best western ever made. It may not be so, but any Ten Best Westerns list that fails to include it cannot be taken seriously.

*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.*