

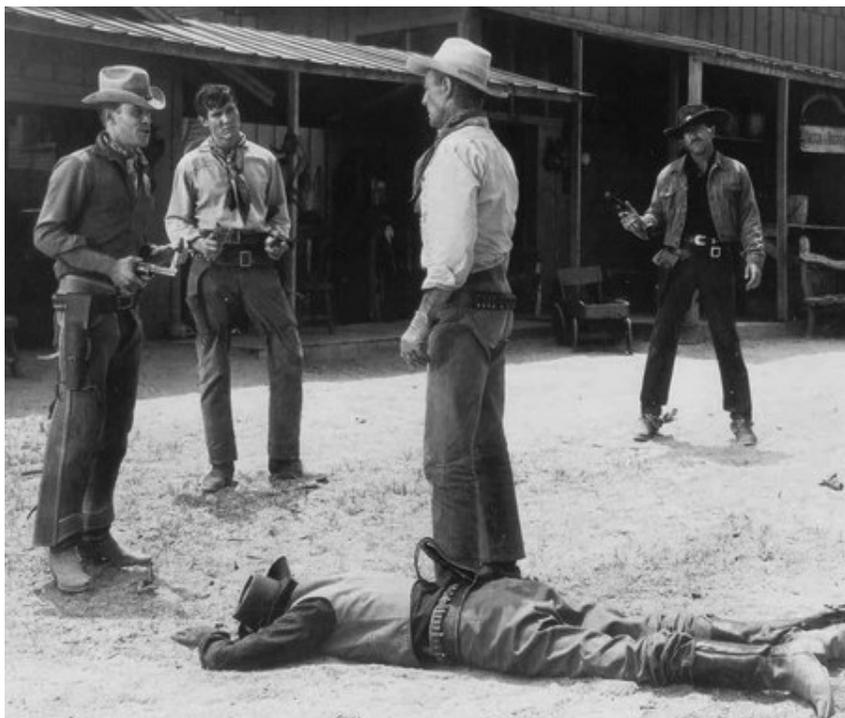
## The Tall T

By Michael Schlesinger

There are mavericks and there are mavericks. And then there's Oscar Boetticher, Jr., or as he preferred, Budd Boetticher. Despite the brevity of his directorial career (15 years, effectively), including many films he dismissed as merely "jobs," his best work was so distinctive and influential that it's still being emulated. (Sergio Leone once spotted him at a film festival and crushed him in a bear hug: "Budd! I stole *everything* from you!") His insistence on doing things his own way often hampered him, especially when he devoted a full decade to an ill-fated documentary about his dear friend, illustrious bullfighter Carlos Arruza; by the time it was finished, so was his career. An accomplished bullfighter in his own right, he made two acclaimed fictional films on the subject as well, along with some brutally effective crime thrillers—and, appropriately, the first three episodes of the classic TV series "Maverick"—but he's most exalted for a series of seven modestly-budgeted westerns made in the second half of the 1950s, all starring Randolph Scott and informally known as the "Ranown Cycle."

It wasn't intended to be a franchise. A script by radio writer Burt Kennedy, "Seven Men From Now," had been purchased by John Wayne's company Batjac, which occasionally produced films with other stars just to sustain income, and Boetticher was hired to direct. Wayne liked the script, but not enough to star in it. With typical grace, he said, "Get Randy Scott. He's through." In fact, Scott had been busy since the end of WW2 starring in middle-budget oaters at Columbia and Warner Bros., and though 58 at the time, he remained a tough, virile screen presence. Since WB was already releasing Batjac's films, the deal was effortlessly made. The movie opened to good business and reviews, while in Europe it was hailed as a tour de force. (In later years, Wayne reportedly expressed belated regret that he'd passed on the role.)

But more importantly, Boetticher, Scott and Kennedy found their relationship so harmonious that they decided to continue it; easily done, as Scott was already partnered with Harry Joe Brown in Scott-Brown Productions (interestingly, Boetticher had met both of them on the 1943 western "The Desperadoes,"



*Skip Homeier and Henry Silva face Randolph Scott, with Richard Boone in the background. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

on which he'd been assistant director). The first to go into production by the new team was "The Tall T," based on an Elmore Leonard short story, "The Captives." It was made for Columbia, as were all but one of the subsequent pictures.

"Seven Men" set the template for Scott's character, and this didn't veer from it: a taciturn cowpoke who's pretty much seen it all and goes his own way, but is far from some Duke-like superman. In this instance, he becomes ensnared in a potentially lethal kidnapping—wealthy plain-jane Maureen O'Sullivan and her new husband, weasly fortune-hunter John Hubbard, are the targeted snatchees—and naturally it's up to him (and him alone) to save the day. The situation is complicated by the fact that the head villain (Richard Boone) is an intelligent, convivial fella who enjoys Scott's company more than that of his sidekicks: a green kid (Skip Homeier) and the inevitable psycho (Henry Silva, also inevitable); the idea of an "attractive" bad guy originated with Lee Marvin in "Seven Men." We know Randy's going to outwit and defeat these varmints—it's a given—but it's *how* he's going to manage it that keeps things trotting along. (In fairness, it should be noted that some of the series' roots may be found in Anthony Mann's "The Naked Spur.")

Typically, violence is rare, brief and sudden. Boetticher and Kennedy clearly feel we're more interested in motivations than actions; the latter's famed

ear for terse dialogue was his hallmark and is on full display (“Bust him, Chink.”). “These weren’t educated people,” Boetticher observed in a 1968 interview, “but they weren’t yup-nope-mebbe folks, either.” The realistic way they speak is unusual for the genre and adds to the authenticity. (Which is not to say that glib dialogue in a western is a bad thing, as Howard Hawks and later Kennedy himself often proved.) In particular, Boone’s speech to O’Sullivan about how he just did her a favor is a little gem of straight-faced sardonicism. And Scott’s climactic pronouncement, “Some things a man can’t ride around,” became almost a signature; he repeated it two years later in “Ride Lonesome” and it’s been often requoted since.

On the DVD, Martin Scorsese speaks of the film’s “flintiness” and “austerity,” which manifests itself in the characters’ interaction, conveyed with a minimum of fuss; these actors (including Arthur Hunnicutt in his patented old coot role) are more than up to this spareness. We already know O’Sullivan (then 45 and minimally made-up) knows that Hubbard would never have married her if not for her money—but he’s still better than nothing...or is he? We know Boone knows his cohorts are “animals,” but “I ride with them” (a dubious loyalty later echoed in “The Wild Bunch”). And he has sufficient self-awareness that he knows what his fate will be, yet he rides away only to return, because he has a code of honor that he must adhere to, even if it means death.

Many of the films were shot in Lone Pine, CA, a favored location for exteriors since 1920, and indeed most of “The Tall T” takes place out-of-doors; several extra-wide shots make the landscape much more than simply a backdrop for the action, and almost everything is in deep focus. (It’s one of three entries shot by Charles Lawton, Jr., one of Columbia’s top DPs in that era.) Much of the tale unfolds in and around a small cave-cum-shack; it still stands today, a prized stop for visiting cinephiles. And it inadvertently contributed to one of the most memorable moments: During one take, Scott accidentally banged his head on the rickety roof above the entrance and Boone burst out laughing. Seeing an opportunity, Boetticher turned the camera toward Boone and told him to break out laughing again. He did, and the result was not only a rare morsel of spontaneous humor, but a reinforcement of the growing bond between Scott and Boone...a bond that remains even as Scott quietly plans to destroy them and their scheme.

As with “Seven Men,” the film earned decent business and reviews, and was highly prized in Europe. But it wasn’t until years later, when the auteur theory gained traction in America, that the Ranowns were finally recognized as small masterpieces. (In 1959, the company was renamed “Ranown” [RANdolph and BrOWN, a pun on “renown”], and the name has since become attached to all seven, even “Seven Men” and the later “Westbound,” a lesser title which was made solely because Scott still owed Warners one more film; it’s not considered part of the series by purists.) “The Tall T” was officially followed by “Decision at Sundown” (the only one not written by Kennedy), the light-hearted “Buchanan Rides Alone” (rewritten by Kennedy without credit), and two in CinemaScope, “Ride Lonesome” (James Coburn’s film debut) and “Comanche Station.” Then came “Arruza” and *le deluge*, while Kennedy moved on to directing, specializing in adroit comedy-westerns such as “Support Your Local Sheriff!” Scott made one more film, Sam Peckinpah’s elegiac “Ride the High Country” (which Budd would have directed had he not been stuck in Mexico), and then retired. Boetticher spent his remaining three decades trying to get a new picture launched; he never really succeeded, but was content to tour the world, feted at film festivals like the unique artisan that he truly was.

One final item that has puzzled moviegoers for decades: Just what *is* The Tall T? I asked him myself one day, and he replied that it’s the name of Tenvoorde’s ranch (the setting of an early scene that we never return to and is thus quite irrelevant), but the explanation somehow got lost in the editing. I asked why he didn’t try to have the title changed, and he smiled cryptically, “Because I liked it!”

Like I said: Maverick.

*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.*