

FILM COMMENT

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EVER MADE?**

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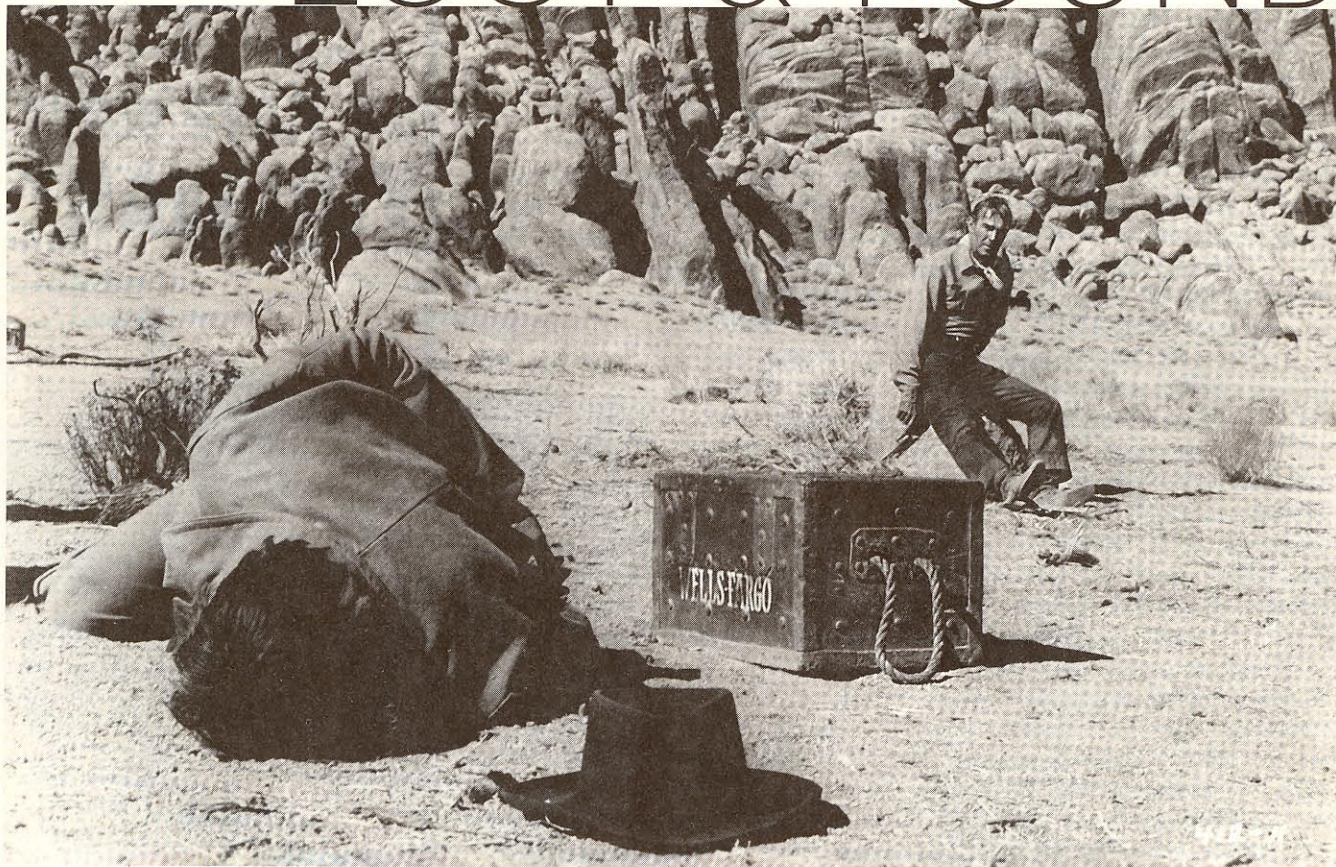
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LOST & FOUND



In the right place at the right time, director Budd Boetticher and his collaborators infused the Western with an almost existential terseness in *Seven Men from Now*. Filmmaker Paul Schrader hails the restoration of a masterpiece presumed lost and fits it into Boetticher & Co.'s oeuvre.

Seven Men from Now is, for me, the quintessential Western not because it is typical, but because it is emblematic.

Westerns, for the most part, were driven by social (the Garden and the Desert, Man Against the Wilderness, the Individual versus the Community) and moral concerns (Forgiveness versus Revenge, Responsibility versus Freedom). Toward the end of its evolution, the genre, straining to remain relevant, moved on to psychological and existential concerns.

Seven Men from Now and the other films of Budd Boetticher's "Ranown Cycle" stand in relation to these traditions as iconography does to

Renaissance art. The films are more presentational than realistic. This may seem like a forced analogy, but it is the only way I can explain the unique appeal these films have for me.

The Ranown Cycle refers to a series of seven B Westerns made from 1956 to 1960, directed by Budd Boetticher, and starring Randolph Scott. Five were written by Burt Kennedy, and five were produced by Harry Joe Brown for Columbia Pictures – the production company being named for Scott (Ran) and Brown (own). The films were *Seven Men from Now* (56), *The Tall T* (57), *Decision at Sundown* (57), *Westbound* (58), *Buchanan Rides*

Alone (59), *Ride Lonesome* (59) and *Comanche Station* (60). The first of these, *Seven Men*, was produced by Batjac (John Wayne's company), for Warner Bros.

In each, Randolph Scott plays a stoic loner on some sort of a journey, who is reluctantly pulled into someone else's problems that mirror his own; in each the moral debate is articulated by a devil's advocate, a smooth-talking doppelganger who has "crossed over" into the world of crime. In *Seven Men* it's Lee Marvin. In other Ranown films the role is filled, variously, by Richard Boone, L.Q. Jones, Claude Akins and Pernell Roberts.

In the first scene of *Seven Men*, as clean and classic an opening scene as you will ever see, Ben Stride (Randolph Scott) wanders upon a lonely campsite where two men sit on a rainy night. He asks if he can join them. Talk turns to the nearby town of Silver Springs. Seems there was a bank robbery. Seems a woman was killed. Seems the robbers, all seven of them, got away. The two cowboys grow increasingly wary. "That killin'," one finally asks, "they ever catch up to them fellas that done it?" "Two of them," Stride replies – and kills them.

The title, like the film, is pre-determined. Seven men robbed a bank. Seven men from now, the protagonist's task will be completed. As the story progresses, the viewer learns all is not that simple: the woman killed in Silver Springs was Ben Stride's wife; she took the job at the bank because he was too proud to take a lesser job after not being re-elected sheriff; he lost the election because he "wasn't good at kissin' babies"; he stole his wife from her first husband. Lee Marvin stands in for Stride's dark side; Gail Russell, for his dead wife.

Through the south Texas landscape rides the most iconographic of Western stars. André Bazin, in his 1957 review of *Seven Men*, was the first to remark on Randolph Scott's resemblance to William S. Hart, the original "old stoneface." Scott seems as detached from the events around him as a pantocrator looking down from a Constantine dome. Increasingly in the Ranown films, Scott refers to himself in the third person ("A man ought to be able to take care of his woman," he says in *Seven Men*), because he is the third person: there's you, me and Him.

Scott is not even a particularly good gunfighter. Only in *Seven Men* does he display traditional pistol skills. In *Buchanan Rides Alone* his life is spared by others five times. Scott survives not so much by skill as by providence. He survives because he is Right. He is sustained not so much by action as by moral decision. In *Comanche Station* Richard Rust says of a dead companion, "It ain't his fault. All he knew was the wild side." Scott replies: "A man can cross over any time." "It ain't that easy," Rust rejoins, "it ain't that easy at all." In *The Tall T*

Richard Boone says of his criminal deeds, "Sometimes you don't have a choice." Scott replies, "Don't you?"

How did this come about? Did Budd Boetticher decide to be a primitive artist? Did the Columbia B unit decide to make archetypal films? I don't think so.

The answer, I think, lies in the interaction of Boetticher, Scott and Kennedy – and the exigencies of budget. (In action films, talk is literally cheap.)

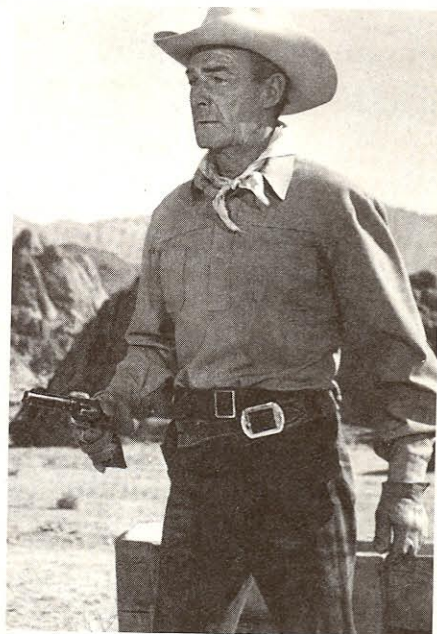
Burt Kennedy is, by nature, a teasing, sardonic writer. His non-Boetticher scripts include *The Rounders*, *Support Your Local Sheriff*, and *The War Wagon*; he loves to inflict indignities on his supposedly righteous protagonists. This "humanizes" them. Boetticher, on the other hand, was deeply invested in the symbolic hero, as epitomized by the bullfighter. Boetticher was, for a time, a bullfighter himself. He made two fiction films about bullfighting as well as a documentary about his friend, the famed matador Carlos Arruza. He saw his protagonists as matadors: alone in the hot sun, figures of grace and style surrounded by noise and danger. They were not "human"; they were exemplars. If Boetticher sought to exemplify his protagonists, well, Randolph Scott was archetype itself. He brought to his characters the bearing, diction and Calvinist rectitude that only closeted homosexuality can muster.

While Kennedy teased, Boetticher and Scott engaged, moving with feints and jabs, knowing in the end only the matador will be left standing. These, I think, were the moral, sexual and iconographic factors at play in this extraordinary series of films.

A final note: *Seven Men from Now* was thought for many years to be a "lost" film. Columbia Pictures has preserved its Ranown films, but *Seven Men*, a Batjac/Warner Bros. Production, had fallen into neglect. When I last saw it on screen, at the AFI in 1971, it had already turned pink (a characteristic of Warnercolor film). The negative was supposedly ruined by water damage. You could only see it on blurred black and white videos. All the more reason to welcome its return to the screen.

Paul Schrader interviewed Russian filmmaker Alexandr Sokurov in the Nov/Dec 1997 issue of *FILM COMMENT*.

The restored *Seven Men from Now* will be presented in the New York Film Festival on September 30th.



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