



Steve McQueen gets ready to battle it out with a group of cattle rustlers in the outdoor adventure drama "Tom Horn."

Steve McQueen isn't quite right as Western hero

Steve McQueen has a terse, laconic style that appears ideally suited for a Western hero.

Tom Horn — Indian scout, Rough Rider, bounty hunter — led a life that was ideally suited for a movie. Put McQueen in Horn's saddle and the result should be a smooth ride.

But it isn't. There's a burr under that saddle. How big a burr depends on your expectations for a movie form that almost became extinct — the Western.

The modern Western springs from two molds: one fashions a contemporary adventure using a Western locale or Western-type characters, such as the "Electric Cowboy."

The other uses the familiar clichés of the old West (cowboys vs. Indians, cattlemen vs. homesteaders, lawmen vs. outlaws) but reinterprets them according to contemporary thought on social structure and institutions.

"Tom Horn" is such a film.

Set in the Wyoming Territory in 1901, it spans a short period when Horn was hired by a cattlemen's association to rid the area of rustlers. He did so in the most direct way, with his rifle.

McQUEEN, WHO hasn't made a film in several years, eases his way into the role but fails to create a definitive character. Instead, we get ambiguity. Is Horn candid or just simple-minded? A shy cowboy or a vicious killer?

The fault isn't all McQueen's. The rapid direction of William Wiard and the muddled script of Thomas McGuane don't give him much help.

When the filmmakers eschewed the colorful adventures of Horn's life to recount this sorry phase, they diluted the character's appeal and importance.

With the rise of a middle class of landowners, Horn becomes a pawn in the transition of power from those who handled guns to those who wielded political clout.

Therein lies a message the heavy-handed script insists on underscoring: the landowners take over from the gunfighters and are just as ruthless.

In one scene, Horn asks the U.S. marshal: "What's the difference between an assassin and a marshal?" "The marshal gets regular checks" is the reply.

It's a sharp piece of dialogue but not enough to sustain an entire movie, particularly when there is a plodding story with very little suspense or excitement.

Every scene is predictable with the exception of some confusing flashbacks. They show Horn romancing a schoolteacher (Linda Evans). She's an avowed adventuress from Hawaii, and how she turned up in this dreary town is anyone's guess. Whether she was a real person or not, she doesn't fit into the film.

What does fit are the dark interiors, mudied streets and weathered buildings photographed in stunning contrast to the beautiful mountainous landscape.

But photography can't substitute for interesting people or events.

When you see a slow-motion sequence of a rider shot off his horse (shades of Sam Peckinpah), and you find yourself admiring the camera work, you know there is something wrong with the script — like lack of dramatic focus, straining for effects and a murky morality.

The hypocrisy of the cattlemen pales beside the ease with which Horn dispatches people.

"Tom Horn" set out to be a serious Western and ended up a serious mix-up.

what's at the movies

NEW RELEASES

ALL THAT JAZZ (R). Tour de force by writer-director Bob Fosse. Roy Scheider plays hard-driving, fast-living choreographer (Fosse) in "behind the scenes" story of unusual imagination and energy.

THE BALTIMORE BULLET (PG). Tacky comedy about pool hall hustlers, with James Coburn and Omar Sharif.

BEING THERE (PG). Peter Seller is a TV-educated economist in satire that pokes fun at our political and social conceits.

BLACK STALLION (G). Story about a boy and a horse told in rich visual images. Terrific performance by Mickey Rooney as an ex-jockey who befriends the boy.

THE CHANGLING (R). George C. Scott in haunted house tries to unravel mystery of a child-murder that took place decades ago.

COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER (PG). Sissy Spacek is outstanding as Loretta Lynn in movie bio of country singer's grueling early years and troubled success.

DEATH SHIP (R). Absurd tale of ship killing its passenger and a captain whose dialogue consists of repeating "blood, blood."

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (PG). "Star Wars" sequel unites original cast in continuation of battle against the evil empire.

FFOLKES (PG). Adventure flick with Roger Moore heading up team of unusual underwater sabotage experts and problem of hijacked oil platform.

FOOLIN' AROUND (PG). The title says it all. Gary Busey is country boy to Annette O'Toole's psychologist/heir.

FOXES (R). Four San Fernando Valley teen-aged girls face problems and pressures of growing up.

FRIDAY THE 13TH (R). A case of overkill as counselors reopen camp closed since a series of vicious murders.

GILDA LIVE (R). Funny sketches and strong language from Gilda Radner, includes Father Sarduelli's monologues and Radner's Roseanne Roseannadanna.

GORP (R). More summer camp shenanigans in this comedy.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

- G General audiences admitted.
- PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.
- R Restricted. Adult must accompany person under 18.
- X No one under 18 admitted.

Troupe offering one-act plays

The Actors Renaissance Theatre has opened its summer repertory season with an evening of two one-acts: "Yanks 3, Detroit 0 Top of the Seventh" by Jonathan Reynolds and "Next" by Terrence McNally.

"Yanks 3, Detroit 0 Top of the Seventh" is a play dealing with the growing desperation of a fading baseball star. Mingling fantasy and reality, the action centers on Duke Bronkowski, an aging big-league pitcher trying for a comeback. It is a play of comic absurdities.

"Next" is a comment on contemporary society. The play is set in an Army Induction Center, where an over-weight, over-age and over-wrought draftee has reluctantly reported for his physical. "Next" is a satirical play with a look at some American attitudes.

Both "Yanks 3, Detroit 0 Top of the Seventh" and "Next" run at 8 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, three times a week, alternating in repertory with "The Wager" by Mark Medoff. Both shows will close June 28.

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