

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Budd Boetticher** and screenings of *The Tall T* and *Comanche Station*

October 1, 2000

Series: *Ride Lonesome: A Budd Boetticher Retrospective*

THE TALL T

Columbia, 1957, 78 mins. 35mm print source: Columbia Pictures Repertory.

Directed by Budd Boetticher. Produced by Harry Joe Brown and Wilfred Shingleton. Written by Burt Kennedy, based on a story by Elmore Leonard. Photographed by Charles Lawton, Jr. Edited by Al Clark.

Original score composed by Heinz Roemheld. Art Direction by George Brooks.

With: Randolph Scott (Pat Brennan), Richard Boone (Frank Usher), Maureen O'Sullivan (Doretta Mims), Arthur Hunnicutt (Ed Rintoon), and Skip Homeier (Billy Jack).

COMANCHE STATION

Columbia, 1960, 74 mins. 35mm print source: Columbia Pictures Repertory.

Directed by Budd Boetticher. Produced by Harry Joe Brown and Randolph Scott. Written by Burt Kennedy. Photographed by Charles Lawton, Jr. Edited by Edwin Bryant. Original score by Mischa Bakaleinikoff. Art Direction by Carl Anderson.

With: Randolph Scott (Jefferson Cody), Nancy Gates (Mrs. Lowe), Claude Akins (Ben Lane) Skip Homeier (Frank), and Richard Rust (Dobie).

The Tall T

Excerpted from *Horizons West* by Jim Kitses (Indiana University Press, 1969):

But characteristically Boetticher plays the game according to the rules, his respect for both audience and form evident in the way in which he disciplines his own experience in the service of the material. Thus, although there are echoes of the bullfight in Scott's attempt to ride and win a seed-bull in *The Tall T*, the scene owes less to the tradition of the corrida than to that of the rodeo, evoked at the outset where cowboys struggle with a bronco that bursts through the corral, dragging our hero behind it. Given Boetticher's preoccupation with bullfighting, one might have expected him to deepen the picture's tone, making the encounter more expressive of his themes. However, to have done so would have been to violate the drama, which here requires the hero be established as amusingly philosophical in the face of set-backs. The imagery of bullfighting often colors Boetticher's films, invariably coming into play where its rituals meaningfully coincide with those of the westerns. In *Comanche Station*, Indians ride in on the hero with spears at the ready like banderillas. At the end of *Ride Lonesome*, Frank charges Scott who stands like a matador ready for the kill. The carcass of Chink, like that of a dead bull, is dragged out of sight by a horse; moments later Boone's final charge ends with hands clutched to head as he wheels blindly, tearing a rough curtain from the mouth of a cave. Everywhere in Boetticher men turn their back on a gun—the majority to their peril. However, such moments, evidence of the personal nature of Boetticher's art, do not depend for their effect upon our awareness of the underlying metaphor, the action growing out naturally from the narrative which he treats with the utmost respect.

It is in the interaction of Boetticher's commitment to character and drama and his distinctively geometrical style that we have the final expression of the game. If often we feel that what we watch is a play within a play, it is not only because Boetticher's art, like sport, rests on inventive variations within the narrowest given limits. Nor is it wholly due to the way in which the films (recalling the action of Shakespeare's dark comedies) trace near-tragic patterns within a comic structure. Above all, the quality flows from the great tension of character and behavior realized with a vivid particularity within a formal discipline that moves towards abstraction. Boetticher's gifts as a filmmaker—intelligent

dramatic organization and a creative use of actors, a fine sense of composition and pace—typically create a world that is both close and distant, action that is open and yet predetermined.

Always Boetticher uses the actual life-style of his performers (rewriting his scripts once the cast is set) to achieve a vigorous life within the drama. Developing with an elegant mathematical precision, the action pyramids, growing peaks of tautness alternating with a leisurely lyricism. The camera moves fluidly within the group as it makes its rounds, pausing here and there to record the lay of issues, the counterpoint of character, within a static frame. As the figures move through landscape, Boetticher stands back to fix them in the depth and perspective of eternity. Often as it dollies with the characters, the camera gradually brings into focus the black blur of danger on the horizon. Men are free to move: the world is hostile.

If finally nothing is possible but the game, we must be grateful that with these films Boetticher found a playing field and ground rules when he most needed them. The strange accident of the Ranown cycle at last allowed the experience of fifteen years of professional attack and frustrated authority to find direction and purpose. Working consistently within a shared traditional form, ideal for the expression of his private world of a questing individualism, Boetticher slowly arrived at a *personal* tradition in the small glittering morality plays that emerged. At his best he achieved here a remarkable formal and dramatic control, *The Tall T*, *Ride Lonesome*, and *Comanche Station* recalling the delicate perfection of finely cut gems, immaculately drawn miniatures. Working at virtually debased levels within the industry, Boetticher nonetheless found the ritual, at once personally sustaining and publicity meaningful, that he required.

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