

RIDE LONESOME: A BUDD BOETTICHER RETROSPECTIVE

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It's rock country and the bleached-white spires burst jaggedly up through the desert sand in a wavering line opposite the setting sun.... As we scan the terrain we discover... a lone rider astride his horse.... The man is tall and lean, dressed in the colors of the desert and the rocks... He wears his sweat-stained hat low down over his eyes.... Unpleasantly, there is an aura of meanness about the man. Watching him you smell the sticky odor of hate that seemingly envelops everything about him except his horse. But in spite of the meanness... you are suddenly overwhelmingly aware that the man is all-over downright beautiful. Even the slightest movement of his body as he swings his head and shoulders around to check his pack-pony is cat-like and deadly. —Budd Boetticher

Although the muscular writing of the passage above, from Budd Boetticher's original scenario for the movie *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, is as stark and vivid as the landscape it describes, the emotions it conjures are anything but simple. Is the lone man a passive observer or a heroic protagonist? What are we to make of the surprising combination of roughness and beauty?

Such questions are raised repeatedly in the deceptively simple films of Oscar "Budd" Boetticher. Now 84 years old, Boetticher is one of the last surviving directors from the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, when skilled craftsman such as Don Siegel, Anthony Mann, and Samuel Fuller could imprint their personalities on low-budget movies. Although less than half of his 32 films were westerns, it was in this most popular of genres that Boetticher made his mark, particularly with a series of films in the late 1950's starring the taciturn Randolph Scott, including *The Tall T*, *Comanche Station*, and *Ride Lonesome*. Indeed, the latter title concisely summarizes the essential story line these films explore in such rich variations. Scott plays the hero who always seems to ride alone—even when he is with others.

The defining passion in Boetticher's life—which helps explain the elemental quality of his films—is bullfighting. While convalescing from a football injury in Mexico in the 1930s, he became fascinated with the sport and eventually became a professional matador. This skill gave him his entrée to Hollywood; he was hired as a consultant on Rouben Mamoulian's 1940 production *Blood and Sand*.

Boetticher worked his way up the studio food chain and became a proficient director of low-budget crime films and thrillers. In 1951, while working for the B-movie factory Republic Pictures, he was given the opportunity to write and direct his first truly personal film, *The Bullfighter and the Lady*, starring Robert Stack in a role strongly modeled on Boetticher's own experiences in Mexico. Significantly, this was the first film credited to "Budd" Boetticher (rather than his given name Oscar).

Boetticher's fascination with bullfighting was driven by an interest in ritualized behavior, the codes of machismo, the sport's combination of brutality and grace, and of course, the primal nature of its climactic showdown. These elements were powerfully transferred to the westerns he began to direct in 1956.

Marked by unflagging narrative momentum and sheer physical beauty, these films exhibit mastery and versatility. They move freely between wide-screen and standard composition, between shadowy black-and-white and bold Technicolor. Yet they are consistent in tone and ethos.

In his landmark essay on Boetticher in the influential genre study *Horizons West*, Jim Kitses writes: "The moral of Boetticher's films is thus a simple one: everyone loses. Life defeats charm, innocence is blasted. The world is finally a sad and funny place, life a tough, amusing game which can never be won

but must be played. If Boetticher's films can darken to near-tragedy, the pessimism is always held in check by an innate response to the absurdity of it all, the way in which we are forced to take up roles in a farce. It is this comic awareness in Boetticher that is behind what appears a natural classicism."

Boetticher's own life took a tragicomic twist in the 1960s, when at the height of his career he shunned Hollywood and went to Mexico to undertake a labor of love—a documentary about his close friend, the legendary matador Carlos Arruza. Over the next seven years, an epic series of misfortunes beset the project, climaxing in a car wreck that killed Arruza and several members of the film crew. Boetticher's marriage fell apart, and he spent time in jail and in a mental institution after suffering a nervous breakdown. Despite some favorable reviews, *Arruza* was a box-office flop, and Boetticher has only directed one other film since, *A Time for Dying*, starring Audie Murphy, in 1971.

Always an independent spirit, Boetticher has never seemed interested in Hollywood's rules. Yet he did play the game long and well enough to leave his mark, a series of personal and accomplished films that establish him as one of the treasures of American cinema.