



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Once Upon a Time in America

The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov wrote that, "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the second one you should fire it. Otherwise don't put it there." That was Chekhov's advice to storytellers, which, in Quentin Tarantino's film masterpiece "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood" the writer-director takes to heart.

Only in this case it isn't a pistol, it's a World War II flamethrower in the hands of a completely self-absorbed actor who, moments before, was floating around in his Hollywood swimming pool.

What makes this film great isn't just DiCaprio's genius turn as a fading television-Western heavy. It isn't even the brilliant acting of Brad Pitt, who plays Cliff Booth, Dalton's long-time stunt-double whose own career is in shambles, who lives in a battered trailer behind a drive-in movie theater, and whose best friend is a pitbull.

What makes this film great is that it's actually a Western. More than that, it's a Western inside a Western, set in the most frontier town of them all: the city of Los Angeles. And if you

understand anything about the history of LA, what it was in the era of the Tate-LaBianca murders, and very much remains today, you must start with the appreciation that Los Angeles was, and remains, Deadwood on steroids.

This movie isn't about the Manson Family, or Sharon Tate. Not really. Like all good Westerns this movie is about the triumph of flawed people over evil. It is an occasionally dragging homage to great filmmaking and the endless cast of wild characters who have populated not just Los Angeles, but our collective nationwide subconscious by virtue of decades of Hollywood storytelling.

Hollywood used to give us heroes in film, but has seemingly dissembled on the notion that such a thing is even possible.

Tarantino's genius in this film is to revitalize the notion that good guys, flaws and all, still get to win out over evil. And it is as an expression of evil that the Manson Family makes its appearance in the film, perfectly embodying Hannah Arendt's observation of how ultimately banal evil truly is. Manson makes his only appearance in the film, for instance, driving a Twinkie delivery truck in a cul-de-sac.

In this world, the good guys win not because they are perfect human beings — they aren't — but because even within the wide latitudes of their behaviors they possess a fundamental decency. Every frontier town needs its own Shane, even if he comes in the form of an actor who has made his career playing bad guys in bad Westerns. It's as if Lee Van Cleef had somehow parachuted into the Ambassador

Hotel and managed to prevent yet another dark turn in American history.

It's by engaging that hope for salvation, and the rich irony with which Tarantino presents the possibility, which causes us to examine our history and think what might have been. And also it's how our cowboy stuntman sidekick can engage evil, face to face, in that most Los Angeles of ways — on an acid trip — and not only fight it off convincingly and with the necessary gallows humor, but also, in the event, singlehandedly revive the much maligned reputation of pitbulls and their place in American society.

Which can only happen in a world that still has good guys and bad guys, which isn't something we like to admit much these days. We seem to believe that evil, as embodied in the characters of Tex Watson and Squeaky Fromme, is born of some fundamental misunderstanding, and can somehow be rehabilitated. The Western, and Tarantino in this film and others, deals with evil walking the earth by hauling out the World War II flamethrower and giving it a solid roasting.

Tarantino is a foul man with a foot fetish, but who else could make a movie where the laconic Vietnam veteran, fading-stuntman-turned drink caddy and gopher, gets to square off

with Bruce Lee in a parking lot? Surely every stuntman walking the earth has wanted to knock some starch out of Bruce Lee's kung-fu sails, which Cliff Booth does with aplomb when, unimpressed by Lee's waxing on mortal combat, he hurls Bruce into the side of a muscle car and gets himself fired from a much-needed gig.

It's notable that Bruce Lee's family has reacted poorly to his portrayal in the film, but only as an asterisk in our "how dare you offend me" zeitgeist.

I took my mother to see this movie and, now that she is nearly 80, was certain she would hate it. She hates most things Hollywood, and has earned it, since she was running around LA when the

Manson family went on its rampage on Cielo Drive. She remembers the terror of that ferociously hot summer. And she also remembers Rose Parades where high school drill teams marched down Colorado Boulevard with six-gun rigs on their hips, unabashedly twirling pistols in the air. Oh, the horrors.

But she loved it. And I think she loved it because it revived the promise of that other, older LA, where a couple of cowboys ride into town, get into some decent scrapes, insult some diners at Musso and Franks, and finally — maybe even accidentally — knock the hell out of evil with one hand on a pitcher of frozen margaritas and the other on a flamethrower.

July weather was mild in Sisters Country

According to preliminary data received by NOAA's National Weather Service in Pendleton, temperatures at Sisters averaged slightly colder than normal during the month of July.

The average temperature was 62.5 degrees, which was 1.8 degrees below normal. High temperatures averaged 81.9 degrees, which was 3.2 degrees below normal. The highest was 91 degrees on July 27. Low temperatures averaged 43.1 degrees, which was 0.4 degrees below normal. The lowest was 35 degrees on July 19.

Precipitation totaled 0.02 inches during July, which

was 0.51 inches below normal. Measurable precipitation — at least .01 inch — was received on one day.

Precipitation this year has reached 9.07 inches, which is 1.34 inches above normal. Since October, the water year precipitation at Sisters has been 12.84 inches, which is 0.23 inches above normal.

The outlook for August from NOAA's Climate Prediction Center calls for above-normal temperatures and near-normal precipitation. Normal highs for Sisters during August are 84.5 degrees and normal lows are 42.8 degrees. The 30-year normal precipitation is 0.44 inches.

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