

At the movies

Clint Eastwood gives 'Pale Rider' its magic

"And I looked and beheld a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was death, and Hell followed with him."

Fifteen-year-old Megan Wheeler's mining camp home had just been attacked (again) by a small force of grizzled

horsemen. She had prayed for a miracle to save her town and her family from the random violence perpetrated by mining baron Coy LaHood.

As she reads these lines from the Bible, her prayers are answered, for a mysterious

stranger (well known to us the "Man With No Name" and the "Outlaw Josie Wales," among other titles) rides upon the scene and fulfills the prophetic recitation.

"Pale Rider" is Clint Eastwood's first western in almost 10 years and one of the few genuine articles since. Mixed with equal parts of myth, biblical allegory and Hollywood

legend, producer-director-star Eastwood takes this story of independent miners scrambling to survive the machinations of corporate villains and their technological toys to its baroque limits. This is a western firmly entrenched in the larger-than-life traditions of the classics.

This time his name is Preacher, a monicker derived from the clerical collar he exposes to independent miner Hull Barret (Michael Moriarty) after saving him from a beating from LaHood's henchmen. Deciding to stay in the community, the steely eyed Preacher becomes a uniting element to the frustrated miners and a problem to the scheming LaHood (Richard Dysart). He'd almost driven the independents out and now their hopes have been rekindled.

For a man without a gunbelt, the Preacher is a tough character. LaHood sends out the monstrous heavy Club (Richard Kiel) to throw a scare into Preacher, who takes out the tough without a drop of sweat. LaHood tries to bribe him — he invites him into his darkened lair to offer him a pulpit in the town (called, naturally, LaHood) — but Preacher turns him down.

Stymied, LaHood finally hires the renegade "Marshal" Stockburn (John Russell), a gunman with a complement of six deputies.

Clint is at his best when playing with his own myth, and this instance is no exception. His persona is so well known that no exposition seems necessary. As the only real icon left in Hollywood, Clint proves that half the meaning of the classic westerns was embodied in the recognizable hero, be it John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Henry

Fonda or Randolph Scott. Like so many variations on a theme, "Pale Rider" begins with the familiar and then plays with it.

In this case, the familiar is not only Clint himself, but the hero who comes from nowhere to right the wrongs of a town, the robber baron versus the small community, the very idea of community and family, and the classic test of skill and endurance.

Clint's firm direction keeps the film moving steadily towards its inevitable destination and his visual flourishes add the color. One of his best touches is LaHood's office, a darkened room that looks out into the light but remains shrouded in blackness. LaHood and his men are but silhouettes in this man-made underworld, a fitting home for his evil plotting. The Preacher's journey to LaHood is like a descent into hell, from which he returns unscathed as the angel of death certainly would.

The film isn't without its flaws, but they are minor. Megaw (Sydney Penny) is given lines she is not talented enough to pull off, and the verbosity of a few scenes runs contrary to the largely compositional construction of the picture.

The quiet performances of the cast, though, particularly Moriarty and Doug McGrath, give the film the understated elegance which Eastwood's grand visual approach makes mythic and beautiful. And then there is Eastwood who is simply himself, the tight-lipped hero who defeats the villain and leaves the community he can never be a part of. He's our only modern hero of mythic stature and perhaps that's why his films are so magical.

By Sean Axmaker



Clint Eastwood stars as the hero who comes from nowhere to right the wrongs in "Pale Rider." Courtesy Photo

Tuesday, July 16, 1985

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