

# *HIGH NOON*

An appreciation by Richard Keys. Copyright 2002

The year 2002 was the silver anniversary of the release of 1952's *High Noon*. In this essay I will try to do justice to what is in my opinion one of the greatest American films.

## THE FILM

The basic plot of *High Noon* is well known and, at first glance, straightforward. Ageing frontier marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) is about to hand in his badge after marrying Quaker Amy (Grace Kelly) when he hears that gunman Frank Miller (Ian McDonald), sent to jail up north by the marshal, is out of prison and returning on the noon train. Frank's brother Ben and two others are waiting at the train depot for his arrival. The marshal starts to leave town with his new wife but changes his mind out on the prairie and comes back to face the gunmen.

He expects to be able to get together a big posse of deputies but everybody deserts him, and he is left to face the four gunmen alone. In one of the film's many ironies, his Quaker wife becomes his only deputy. It is no accident that the only two people who offer to help him, a young boy and a drunk, are not burdened by fear and guilt. "I'm old for my age" says the boy. Cooper brings great resonance to his reply: "You're old for your age, all right".

It is interesting that it is only near the beginning of the film that the marshal articulates any reasons for facing the gunmen. Riding away from town he says "They're making me run; I've never run from anyone before", and when he returns with Grace Kelly to town: "They'd just come after us, four of 'em, and we'd be all alone on the prairie". After that he offers little explanation, finally saying only "If you don't know, I can't tell you". Perhaps he no longer knows himself.

In a key scene, where the pros and cons of helping the marshal are debated by churchgoers, the case is finally made against him by Thomas Mitchell, with the economic rationalist argument that a gunfight in the streets would be bad for business! Cooper utters the one word "*thanks!*" (Cooper is very good at few words spoken in contempt), and as he leaves the church children are outside playing gunmen - "Bang! you're dead, Will Kane!"

Another key scene is the one which most pointedly expresses the film's symbolic and allegorical purposes in the McCarthyist era, admittedly somewhat heavy-handedly: the judge takes down the scales of justice and the American flag before leaving town. In the face of collective cowardice, law and justice cannot exist.

The one weak scene is the lengthy fistfight between Cooper and Lloyd Bridges, apparently a concession to box office requirements. Apart from stretching credulity to its limit by having the ageing marshal endure a beating before tackling the gunmen, it breaks down the otherwise inexorable momentum to the arrival of the train. Leading up to the train's arrival is a montage sequence which bears comparison with the "Odessa Steps" montage from *Battleship Potemkin*. The scene of Cooper writing his will is intercut with individual shots of the townsfolk all waiting frozen, the gunmen at the station, the empty streets, the pendulum of the clock, and the clock hands, building slowly to the moment when the train whistle cuts through.

Zinnemann was reportedly proud of the stunning high crane shot showing the tiny marshal in the empty streets (a refinement of the geometric visuals he used in 1948's [Act Of Violence](#)), which is followed by the marvellously choreographed gunfight. The ending of the film is remarkable - taking less than one minute from

the climactic gunfight's end. There is a shot, taken from the rear, of people pouring onto the street, no longer individuals but anonymous cowards. The young boy brings up a buggy. Cooper looks kindly towards the boy, frowns at everyone else, and, in one of the defining moments of the cinema, takes off his badge of office and throws it contemptuously into the dust. He and Grace ride away in the buggy. The End. Not a word is spoken. In a modern film this ending would have taken half an hour!

The ballad *High Noon*, sung by Tex Ritter, was used to comment specifically on the story. Written by the composer of the score, Dimitri Tiomkin, with lyrics by Ned Washington, it is sung in the first person as if by Will Kane, imploring his wife not to leave him. It adds another dimension to his increasing desperation, but its impact is somewhat marred by the excessive use of the song throughout the film.

## THE PRODUCTION

The film's producer was Stanley Kramer, well known for low-budget socially realist films, in contrast to most Hollywood product of the day. The film was shot in black and white on a tight four weeks schedule. The director Fred Zinnemann had already worked on *The Men* (1950) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1953) for Kramer. The veteran cameraman Floyd Crosby, who worked on Murnau and Flaherty's *Tabu* (1931) and Pare Lorenz' *The River* (1937), provided the gritty documentary feel the director wanted for *High Noon*. In Zinnemann's Hadleyville, the skies are always grey.

## THE SCREENPLAY

The superb screenplay by Carl Foreman is the bedrock on which the strength of the film is built. It is based on the short story *The Tin Star* by John W. Cunningham. A short story is a very good basis for a film script, as it can be expanded and altered without losing its essential unity. One has only to compare Zinnemann's *From Here To Eternity*, made the next year from James Jones' lengthy novel which defied compression, to see the difference.

Foreman brilliantly uses unities of time and place so that time itself becomes one of the main stars. In the film's running time of less than 90 minutes, we see a gallery of characters painting an extraordinarily rich picture of the town and its inhabitants. The remarkably economical script gives each character at least a few lines to express something about their character and point of view. A good screenplay will reflect the

world outside the story: *High Noon* hints at or reveals many things - why Grace Kelly became a Quaker; the romantic life of Katy Jurado; Lloyd Bridges' bitterness at being passed over for his boss's job; why Lon Chaney Jr. is crippled and so on. There is real tension in the town, with the "respectable folk" happy it's been cleaned up and 'made safe', while those who lost out from the 'cleanup', the drinkers at the bar and the resentful hotel clerk, want to see Kane killed. An extraneous sub-plot, in which a deputy racing to the marshal's aid is delayed in a cantina, was wisely dropped.

## THE CAST

**Gary Cooper** had a long and distinguished career, famously as the Honest Joe of Capra's *Mr Deeds Goes To Town*, and winning an Oscar for *Sergeant York* in 1941. But as a romantic hero he seemed decidedly ill at ease, and sometimes suffered woeful miscasting, notably as obsessive architect Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*. But in *High Noon* he found the perfect role, his dogged taciturnity and the pain he was suffering from an ulcer during the shooting leading to the performance of his career. It is hard to imagine anyone else in the role. It was offered to Gregory Peck, but he declined due to the similarity to his part in *The Gunfighter*, which is fortunate, given his bland performance in that film.

**Grace Kelly** in her first film brings the right level of virginal purity to the role, and the script gives her a chance to dig a bit deeper when she tells Katy Jurado why she has become a Quaker: "My father and my brother were killed by guns. They were on the right side, but that didn't help them any when the shooting started".

**Katy Jurado** gives a superb performance as a passionate Mexican woman who points out a few home truths to Grace Kelly. In one scene she has only to jut out her jaw to stop an inappropriate comment from a townsman dead in its tracks.

**Lloyd Bridges** brings a certain oily charm to his role of the deputy marshal, after the top job but wanting to stay out of the firing line.

**Lon Chaney Jr** gets to make perhaps the key observation from the pressured screenwriter: "Deep down inside, people just don't care".

**Howland Chamberlin** gives a memorable cameo as the hotel clerk who crows to Grace Kelly of his pleasure at the return of the gunmen: "You asked me ma'am, so I told you".

## THE BLACKLIST

The production of *High Noon* was just getting underway when the hovering Iron Curtain of McCarthyism fell on the American film industry. The writer and co-producer Carl Foreman, like most creative film people, was accused of being a communist. The reaction of producer Stanley Kramer to this was interesting. He took Carl Foreman's credit as co-producer off the film, but kept his writer credit. Whatever his motive for this inscrutable act, he did the right thing; anyone can be a co-producer, but Carl Foreman's name has come down through the years linked to one of the best screenplays ever written. Time brings vindication. Aspiring film writers who do not study *High Noon's* script closely have chosen the wrong profession.

## THE BOUQUETS

Almost from the moment of release, *High Noon* was a critical and popular success. Even though denied Best Film and Best Director at the 1952 Academy Awards, it still won four Oscars - including Gary Cooper for Best Actor and Harry Gerstad and Elmo Williams for Best Editing - one occasion when the Academy got it right. And the theme song *High Noon*, slightly modified with more general words and sung by Frankie Laine, was a huge hit-parade success.

## THE BRICKBATS

The backlash was not long in coming. Spooked by McCarthyist paranoia, people deserted *High Noon* in droves - rather proving the film's allegorical point.

So-called critics claimed to "see through" the film, that it was "too contrived"(!), that it was either coded fascism or communist propaganda. And other filmmakers fell over themselves to disown it. John Wayne kept attacking the film for years, as late as 1975 telling *Playboy* magazine of his "pleasure" in having Carl Foreman expelled from America, courtesy the infamous Black List. Howard Hawks hated the film, apparently taking particular exception to Grace Kelly shooting a gunman in the back (even though she saves her husband's life). He made *Rio Bravo* (1959) as a supposed "riposte" to *High Noon* - a rambling western in which marshal John Wayne holes up with a drunk and a cripple, waiting for the bad guys to make a wrong move. At least Gary Cooper takes the initiative!

The film was criticised by some feminists for not having stronger women roles. This is absurd - the nature of the story is that all characters except the marshal are minor, and in any case the two women are pivotal to the story. Grace Kelly, as mentioned before, as the marshal's only deputy, saves his life at the cost of her most profound beliefs. And Katy Jurado's passionate Mexican woman who has been the lover of the gunman, the marshal, and the young deputy, provides one of the film's strongest strands. "You are a good looking boy, you have big broad shoulders (50s code for good in bed?), but he is a man. It takes more than big broad shoulders to make a man, Harvey, and you have a long way to go..."

## THE CRITICS

*High Noon* has been endlessly raked over by critics (including me) in the last fifty years. It started not long after the film was made, when a Harvard undergraduate wrote an essay about the film's "Aristotelian poetics", submitted by his proud father to a no doubt bemused Fred Zinnemann. Allegories of Christianity and Everyman were discovered. The film was supposed to be an allegory of the United Nations, and of the Korean War, this latter apparently baffling and infuriating an ageing Fred Zinnemann, as well it might.

## THE SPIN-OFFS

As you might expect with a film of such stature, there have been a number of spin-offs and rehashes. The title itself has entered the language permanently to suggest a showdown or confrontation, and still has wide currency even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, turning up in newspaper headlines, book titles, etc. There are two interesting documentaries: Leonard Maltin's *The Making Of High Noon*, made in the nineties, and, especially, *Darkness At High Noon: The Carl Foreman Documents*, made in 2002. *Outland*, made in 1981, purportedly is *High Noon* in space and *High Noon Part 2 - The Return Of Will Kane*, made in 1980, was a pathetic attempt to siphon off some of the strength of the original screenplay. Finally there is *High Noon 2002*, a leaden filmmaking-by-numbers effort which follows the Carl Foreman screenplay reasonably closely, but lacks style, tension, characterization, dramatic use of music, editing technique or anything else that distinguishes the original. For some weird reason, Frank Miller now arrives on the noon train with two extra gunmen, so that poor weary Tom Skerritt has to tackle not four but six adversaries. Apart from his other problems, he has trouble keeping count! Indeed, more is less.

## THE EULOGY

Today we can see *High Noon* for what it is, not as a flavor-of-the-month award winner, or a chance hit riding on the back of a popular song, but a superbly written, brilliantly directed, skillfully edited and finely acted film within the western genre, but with a wider allegorical purpose to explore the nature of collective cowardice and individual bravery.

The death earlier this year of Katy Jurado severed one of the last links to the production of *High Noon*. *Vita Brevis, Ars Longa*. Let us hope that in fifty or a hundred years time the film will be still seen and appreciated in whatever format is then in use. When one looks at so many modern American films - asinine teen "comedies" and bloated violent dramas with incoherent, obscenity-riddled dialogue, one has to say - they don't make them like *High Noon* anymore.

**SOURCE:** [http://www.bighousefilm.com/high\\_noon.htm](http://www.bighousefilm.com/high_noon.htm)