

RODEO IN AMERICAN FILM

by Jim Hoy

From the beginning American film has contributed extensively to both the romanticizing and the popularizing of the cowboy. One aspect of the cowboy, however, that has not translated successfully to film is rodeo, the distinctive horse sport unique to the American West that took its shape primarily on the Great Plains in the late 19th century. Of the thousands of film westerns made, only a handful depict rodeo even tangentially, and fewer than ten (excluding documentaries), to my knowledge, could legitimately be called "rodeo" movies.

Three of these films, *The Lusty Men*, *Bronco Buster*, and *Arena*, come from the early 1950s. For some reason or other four rodeo movies were released in 1972: *J.W. Coop*, *Junior Bonner*, *The Honkers*, and *When the Legends Die*. Another movie I would include in this group, because rodeo is one of its two major framing actions (mustanging is the other), is *The Misfits* from 1961. Perhaps we should not be surprised to find most of the rodeo sequences in these films riddled with clichés--it's hard to find a western movie that isn't--but I am disappointed at finding even those films made with the advice and assistance of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association riddled as well with technical errors in the events and actions that comprise rodeo itself. At best these clichés and errors in detail serve to perpetuate in the popular mind some of the erroneous conceptions of rodeo as sport; at worst they can destroy the credibility of the films in which they are found.

The earliest of these movies, *The Lusty Men*, is, in my opinion, the most

successful in conveying the life and spirit of rodeo, and its action scenes are competently handled. Moreover, the film has a strong plot and an excellent cast--Robert Mitchum as the over-the-hill rodeo champion, Arthur Kennedy as the young rancher turned into a champion rider by Mitchum, and Susan Hayward as Kennedy's wife, at first reluctant, then enthusiastic about rodeoing. The movie is not pretentious, and it makes plausible to a contemporary audience certain historical aspects of rodeo, such as "splitting" (i.e., the sharing of prize money) a once-common practice.

I have not seen *Arena* since it first came out. Even then, however, my young eye discerned that the main function of the movie was to serve as a vehicle for the new three dimensional screening techniques then coming into vogue, not to look seriously at rodeo, as had *The Lusty Men*. Even worse, Gig Young was not convincing as a cowboy, whereas Mitchum had both the appearance and the bearing of a rough-stock rider on the downhill side of his talent. I have not been able to see *Bronco Buster*, but the descriptions I have read suggest that, although the story line is hackneyed (older rodeo cowboy helping younger one learn the ropes and both after the same girl), the rodeo action is good. Casey Tibbs had a role in the movie, so perhaps he was able to exert some quality control over the rodeo action scenes.

In general I find *The Misfits* (with Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift, and Marilyn Monroe) a successful film although too self-consciously symbolic. Concerning its portrayal of rodeo, the movie has many flaws, not the least of

which is that Gable's character, named Gay, is simply not credible as "a pretty good roper." Perce (Clift's character), at least, has the look of a rodeo cowboy even though his moody introspectiveness does not square with his physical image. The script has him commit such blunders as, when talking to his mother on the pay phone, telling her that he has just won a hundred dollars bull riding (a decent pay-off for 1961) and a silver buckle with a bucking horse on it, not a bull.

The rodeo scene at Dayton (the scenery suggests Nevada) comes on a little too strong for believability. Not that cowboys do not drink, but Perce flashes the bottle a bit too blatantly, and while he does much yelling, supposedly at fellow riders, we never see any of the other contestants. A few real-looking cowboy friends for Perce among all the extras hired would have added much to the credibility of the arena scenes. The canned noise and excessive applause during the rides are disturbing, as is the unexplained dogging steer running loose after Perce has been bucked off his saddle bronc. This buck-off, by the way, is one of the better parts of the technical aspects of the movie. The fall is reasonably convincing and the director (John Huston) is to be commended for not using a phony close-up of Clift on a faked ride.

The bull riding seems to come immediately after the bronc riding, these two events apparently the only ones in the entire rodeo, and this sequence is not handled nearly so well as the bronc riding. When Rosalynde, played by Marilyn Monroe, tries to dissuade Perce from getting on his bull, he replies "I put in for it," a phrase that is more reflective of Arthur Miller's attempt to philosophize than it is of rodeo genuine slang. In addition, the bull rope goes on too quickly, and the fall from the bull is

not at all realistic. The clown makes no real attempt to protect Perce, and the bull quite obviously misses the fallen rider, although the bandages on Perce's head proclaim differently later in the movie. Not only is this bandage a bit much, but Perce's insistence on wearing his torn shirt to the dance, like a kid just thrown off his first bull, is quite amateurish. In short, the arena scenes lack realism (as do certain aspects of the mustangling): there are no other cowboys in the arena, Perce seems to have no equipment, and he goes through none of the pre-ride rituals universal among rodeo contestants. In fact, I perceive only two authentic aspects of rodeo ambience in the film: Perce dances like a cowboy, and Gay, awakened after the long drive from the dance to his cabin way back in the country, cries out "Wha, wha, I'll drive!" Anyone who has had occasion to go down the road many miles at all will appreciate that line.

Of the 1972 rodeo movies *Junior Bonner* (starring Steve McQueen) and *When the Legends Die* (with Richard Widmark and Frederick Forrest) are the least successful. *Junior Bonner*, for instance, is a little too much Steve McQueen and not quite enough PRCA bull rider. What bull rider pulls a one-horse trailer with his name painted on it in big letters? Or wears a beat up straw hat that would be better suited to a farmer in a wheat field? Or displays such animosity when the stock is being drawn? (The whole stock drawing scene, in fact, is patently phony.) And what rodeo starts with saddle broncs, then goes to barebacks?

On the positive side, *Junior's* felt hat is as authentic as some of the dialogue at the chutes, as is *Junior's* reluctance to grab hold of the cow in the wild cow milking. Also, the steer wrestling action is well filmed, and

announcing during the bull riding sounds professional. The plot is structured around Prescott, Arizona's 84th annual rodeo which did, in fact, occur in 1972. Setting the film here, the site of the world's first full-scale rodeo, is undoubtedly intentional, thus emphasizing the conflict of traditional Western values when pitted against modern commercialization (represented by Junior's brother, a wheeler-dealer played by Joe Don Baker). The movie is good entertainment, but I think that a director of Peckinpah's proclivities and talents could have done more with rodeo if he had better understood its essence, the underlying competition of man versus animal, man versus man.

When the Legends Die has as its major theme the conflict of Indian and white values, but rodeo is the vehicle through which Tom Blackbull (Frederick Forrest) succeeds in the white world. Under the tutelage of Red (Richard Widmark) Tom learns how to ride broncs, as well as how to buck off convincingly so that Red can hustle bets. The sequence of amateur rodeos where Red and Tom are throwing rides and winning bets is not at all realistic; such a scam simply could not have been pulled off in real life to the extent that it is in the film. Moreover, in the rodeos in this movie saddle bronc riding seems to be the only event, and only one announcer seems to have been available for any rodeo anywhere in the West (at least he is the only one employed by the film's producers). Later Tom gets the nickname Killer for having literally ridden four broncs to their deaths in the arena. This action is implausible to the extreme; stock contractors, pick up men, other cowboys, the PRCA, and the SPCA would have ended it immediately. Nor would any cowboy I have ever known get so angry that he would throw away at the side of the road a good old

bronc saddle, as Tom does.

Worst of all in this movie are the physical impossibilities foisted on the viewer by incompetent editing. When Tom first learns to ride, for instance, Red has him practicing in an old corral. When Tom leaves the chute he is riding a rough-out saddle, then, during the midst of the ride, a close-up suddenly reveals that he is on a basket-stamped saddle, then back to the rough-out. To cite another example, some riders are ambidextrous and can ride equally well with the buck rein in either hand, but I have never seen one who could switch hands in the middle of a ride and get the rein on the correct side of the horse's head in the process. Not only does Tom, through the magic of incompetent editing, effortlessly perform this stunt, but in another scene, on a horse named Rawhide, he switches hands some four or five times and either changes horses, or camera lenses, because the horse changes color during the ride. For these reasons, as well as for a somewhat shaky story line, I find this the least believable of all the rodeo movies.

In terms of technical accuracy the best of the 1972 rodeo movies is *The Honkers* because it shares with *The Lusty Men* forthrightness of plot and credibility of rodeo detail. The movie is quintessential James Coburn. He plays Lou Lathrop, a not-so-lovable, slightly aging rake who comes back to his home town and his estranged wife (Lois Nettleton) for the annual rodeo. With him is his traveling partner, a rodeo clown named Clete (played by Slim Pickens). Because Pickens actually worked as a rodeo clown, his arena scenes are especially believable. In fact, the ambience of rodeo comes across well in this film. In one scene, for instance, the contractor is trying out a new bareback bronc, and Lou, a saddle

bronc rider, bets he can ride him. To do so, he, with Clete's help, employs a trick that has actually been used--running a piece of whang leather around the waist and through the rigging handle. The scene in the rodeo office as cowboys sign up (bull riders being joked about their lack of intelligence, etc.) has a natural feel. Even Coburn's doubles in the riding scenes look like him (except that one wears an obviously cheaper hat), and the fake tight-in shots of Coburn riding are kept to a minimum. (Too bad they were not eliminated.)

The five standard events of rodeo are represented in proper sequence only in *The Honkers*, although not all in one performance--we see barebacks to saddle broncs the first day, saddle broncs to bulls the second day of the rodeo. There is also good detail of the action around the chutes--powdering flank pulls, setting bareback rigs, pulling saddle cinches, rosining ropes and chaps, spraying ether on an injured hand, taking a death wrap on a bull. The realistic patter from the announcer punctuates rather than dominates the rodeo sequences, and the extras include professional rodeo cowboys. Lou's hang-up in the bull rope is to be expected, but it is not overdone. Contrary to expectation, it is not Lou but Clete who suffers the injury, in this case a fatal broken neck. In fact, the only major weakness in technical accuracy is the character of the stock contractor--he looks phony and he acts phony.

J.W. Coop is the most ambitious of the rodeo movies, and in some of its technical details its rodeo scenes are the most impressive. Unhappily, it is also overly symbolic and sloppily edited. Cliff Robertson wrote, directed, and starred in the film, an over-extension of his energies that undoubtedly allowed some of the film's flaws to slip through.

On the positive side Robertson looks, dresses, acts, talks, and walks just as a rodeo cowboy should. He is properly solicitous of his hats, and he is realistically superstitious--he will ride only in borrowed chaps. The fake close-ups are not overdone, and there is some excellent action photography, particularly those slow motion shots of bull riding that show the extreme power of these animals. Those who have seen this movie have witnessed one of the most incredible scenes ever filmed--the hang-up on the bull at the finale. There is no way to fake hanging-up on a bull. When the slow-motion camera shows the head of the rider snapping back as his cheek is hit by a horn, I thought of the few bulls I got on in my younger days and I cringed and I hurt. I was told by a bronc rider who knew him that John Wilson, the double in that ride, came up to Robertson after the first take, bloody and battered, and asked if they needed another one, if they wanted him to do it again.

This scene compensates for many of the shortcomings of *J.W. Coop*, and shortcomings it does have. I have mentioned the heavy-handed symbolism. J.W., as the movie opens, is being released (i.e., reborn) from prison where he was held for nine years and nine months on a bad check set up. And just in case we don't see that the hero is alienated to the nth degree, the movie spells it out for us: he wrote the check at Lone Hill, and he tells Bean, his hippie girlfriend, "I'm the original loner."

Concerning technical aspects of rodeo, in spite of the excellent riding shots, sloppy editing has created some serious gaffes. The movie, for instance, opens very effectively in total darkness with a roaring sound like a lion. A bull is being readied for riding at the prison rodeo, J.W.'s bull. And he makes a good ride--considering the fact that he

be nihilistic. The loner hero cannot win because he has no control over the forces of change that threaten the old ways, the invidious sophistication that runs roughshod over traditional values. It seems to me that the hero of the classic western was symbolically fighting the forces of nature, forces that were indeed conquered in the winning of the West. The hero of the rodeo western, on the other hand, seems to be fighting an all-encroaching civilization, the very civilization which his predecessor had made possible. Moreover, the Old West cowboy had real weapons with which to fight his real enemies--pistols and rifles against Indians and outlaws. The rodeo cowboy does not have that power, nor are his enemies so clearly defined. His struggle is individual and ultimately pointless; heroic action is possible only as a futile gesture.

Thus the cosmic struggles of the Old West cowboy have been reduced to

contests between men and animals in a sporting arena. However different in real life the cowboy of the 1870s may have been from his cinema counterpart in the traditional westerns, nonetheless the Old West and the cowboy hero existed in the national consciousness as one of our authentic myths. Rodeo is an outgrowth of this myth, a remnant of the Old West, but it is not the Old West. In the latter, nature was literally conquered; in rodeo, nature is symbolically conquered. The Old West was awe-inspiring, like a nature movie showing a grizzly in the wild; rodeo is entertaining, like a circus movie showing a trained bear. The rodeo movie not only foreshadowed the nihilism of the contemporary western, it also reduced the myth of the old West to ritual, fatal struggle to sport and game.

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