

Tension at Table Rock

US : 1956 : dir. Charles Marquis Warren : RKO : 93 min
 prod: : scr: Winston Miller : dir.ph.:
Billy Chapin
 Richard Egan; Dorothy Malone; Cameron Mitchell; Royal Dano; Edward Andrews;
 John Dehner; Joe De Santis; DeForrest Kelley; Angie Dickinson

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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Soaper Western with Egan on the lam for a murder committed in self-defense. ** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"There's little action but bags of atmosphere in Winston Miller's screenplay from the novel "Bitter Sage" by Frank Gruber. Egan is member of a gang whose leader is regarded by people as a sort of Robin Hood. When Egan has to shoot him dead in self-defense he's despised by everyone. He takes orphan boy Chapin (brother of Michael) under his wing, with whom he comes to Table Rock. There, by siding with sheriff Mitchell, he is able to change opinions about him. Joseph Broc was the good cameraman and Dimitri Tiomkin provided the atmospheric music. ***"

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"When a stagecoach station owner is killed, a gunman takes care of his small son and at the same time rids a town of outlaws. All the clichés are in this one, fairly neatly amassed in corners labelled "HIGH NOON", "HONDO" and "SHANE". From a novel by Frank Gruber."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

"An adult Western in which a man must prove he has been unjustly labeled a coward. Good performances. **1/2 "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Another Western with a theme song (what Western hadn't in those days?) as well as echoes of "HIGH NOON" and "SHANE". It's adapted from Frank Gruber's novel "Bitter Sage" and directed by Charles Marquis Warren, himself a distinguished author of wild west yarns. Richard Egan is impassive as the friendless gunman, Edward Andrews impressive as a sneaky villain. Dorothy Malone is a bit too good to believe in a pokey town like Table Rock, but she should worry; her next film, "WRITTEN ON THE WIND", would bring her an Oscar. The colour photography by Joseph Broc is extremely fine and the credits nicely done. "Star Trek"s DeForest Kelley is first-class in a cameo as another gunman. *** "

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial Guide to the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Charles Marquis Warren was the creative force behind such great TV Western shows as

"Gunsmoke", "Rawhide" and "The Virginian". Each week these programmes plundered B movies and serials for their ideas, so it should come as no surprise that Warren rustled the plotlines from two classics of the genre, "**HIGH NOON**" and "**SHANE**", for this tale of smoking guns and smouldering passions. *** "

"Western starring Richard Egan. Wes Tan-cred is unjustly accused of murder when he kills in self-defense. Branded a coward, he travels to another town where trailherders are terrorising the local people. *** "

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Chapin:

"Not many boy actors began their film careers by playing Gary Cooper's baby daughter, but this honour went in 1944 to the 22-day old Billy Chapin in "**CASANOVA BROWN**". Drunk with self-importance, he then played Lana Turner's baby in "**MARRIAGE IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR**".

Handsome Billy rested on his laurels for most of the next decade. In 1952 he at last got a plum part in a stage musical called "*Three Wishes For Jamie*", which won him the New York Critics' Award as the year's most promising actor. The he did some TV work, and at nine returned to the cinema, with a good role as Dan Dailey's baseball-crazy son in "**THE KID FROM LEFT FIELD**".

He had an attractively dreamy expression, and sometimes needed galvanising into action. This happened to him forcefully enough when Charles Laughton directed him in "**THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER**". Laughton praised him afterwards as an "acting technician", but the effect is sometimes as if Billy were acting by numbers, responding to instructions from the director: strange, abrupt, startled-fawn reactions which are undoubtedly beautiful yet not quite real."

A modest but agreeable kind of Western with a quiet, solid hero in Richard Egan and one or two shades of characterisation that make it a cut above just another "**SHANE**" lookalike. It's quite true that Egan is Alan Ladd, Chapin is Brandon De Wilde, Malone is Jean Arthur, Cameron Mitchell is Van Heflin, and Deforest Kelly ambles genially into the last reel as a Jack Palance you could take home to mother. It's a basic cattle-herder vs sodbuster tale, and even the scene where one of the immigrant settlers is gunned down in town is replicated.

The "**HIGH NOON**" strand lies in the character of Cameron Mitchell as sheriff of Table Rock. Earlier in his life he received a merciless beating at the hands of cattle-herders, the scars of which are literally written on his face. Now, though clearly no coward, he finds it hard to summon the moral courage to assert his authority when once a year they come spilling into his town harassing and intimidating the townsfolk.

Jody Barrows (Chapin) watches his father gunned down by three desperadoes intent on robbing the next stagecoach to halt at their remote blacksmithy. "Mr Bailey" (Egan) happens to be on hand at the time, and gets the drop on the three killers, but is strangely reluctant to hang around for the reward offered by the stagecoach line. He delivers the orphaned Jody to the door of his uncle, sheriff Miller and his wife, but Jody promptly runs away to trail after him, not suspecting that "Mr Bailey" is in fact Wes Tancred, notorious gunslinger excoriated by a popular ballad of the day for gunning down a friend in cold blood. Egan patiently returns the boy once again to his relatives in town, and is prevailed upon to stick around, partly by Jody's insistent attachment to him, partly by his empathy with the sheriff's personal dilemma, and partly from an unspoken mutual feeling that passes between him and Dorothy Malone. Like Shane, he is loathe to mix in the quarrel between the townsfolk and the herders, but he watches and makes his silent presence felt.

Whereas, say, in Clint Eastwood's later "**PALE RIDER**" (in which Brandon De Wilde underwent a sex change for the 1980s), the emphasis was on skull-busting, here there are more nuances to the battle lines. The leader of the cattle herders makes the homesteaders a reasonable offer of compensation to drive his cattle through their land. When the sheriff rides out to talk with him about the worries of the townsfolk, he is duly conciliatory, and sends the word round that there's to be no drunken hooliganism this year. It's only when one of his men

provokes a quarrel and shoots a settler dead, but plants a gun on the body to make it seem like self-defence, that his loyalty to his cattle drivers overcomes a willingness to compromise.

As usual, the real villain of the piece is a scheming local businessman secretly in cahoots with the cattlemen. But another nice touch is that the gunslinger he sends for to put paid to the obstinate sheriff (DeForrest Kelly of “**Star Trek**” fame) turns out to be an old friend of Egan’s. In place of the macho sizing-up between Alan Ladd and Jack Palance in “**SHANE**”, here the two men are clearly delighted to see one another, which gives the inevitable gunfight between them a subtly different edge.

Egan’s reveals his true identity as the shamed outlaw Wes Tancred in court when he gives testimony to the killing of the settler, obliging Sheriff Miller finally to uphold the truth, whatever the consequences. Young Jody, of course, stands by his feeling for the man, regardless of the rumours. The boy has taken a job (he’s 12) at the town newspaper, for no better reason than that Egan says he worked for his own town paper when he was that age. There’s a brawl at one point in the newspaper office between a cattleman and the editor, when Egan comes to the rescue. Jody gets a broken arm in the brawl and spends the rest of the film in a sling, so the one scene from “**SHANE**” we don’t need to sit through again is the tearful waving goodbye shot.

The resolution of “**TENSION AT TABLE ROCK**” is rather lame, when the whole town spontaneously recover their nerve and see off the cattlemen by superiority of numbers – not quite the way it turned out in “**HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER**” – but the emphasis here is more on character in crisis than the usual saloon brawls and shootouts.

Billy Chapin, younger brother of Michael, made films for Fox, Republic, RKO and United Artists. Besides those already mentioned above by Holmstrom, others of interest included “**TOBOR THE GREAT**” (53), “**THERE’S NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS**” (54), “**VIOLENT SATURDAY**” (55) and “**A MAN CALLED PETER**” (55). Here his role is entirely formulaic – the hero-worshipping kid – and he’s given no emotional scenes, either on the death of his father or the discovery his hero is the despised coward of popular folklore.

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