

# Johnny Guitar

By Michael Schlesinger

There are very few films—especially from Hollywood studios—that truly deserve to be called *sui generis*. But “Johnny Guitar” is surely one of them. Even its log line—“a Joan Crawford western”—sounds faintly ludicrous, like “an Ernest Borgnine musical.” But from its humble beginning as a critically-dismissed vanity production, it has grown in stature over the decades, boosted by the likes of Martin Scorsese and Francois Truffaut (who said anyone who didn’t like it should never be permitted inside a cinema again, a severe if well-intentioned endorsement), serving as an inspiration for other films, and even being adapted into an award-winning off-Broadway musical in 2004, until it now stands as a unique combination of disparate — and none too friendly — talents managing to pull a golden egg out of a very odd duck and creating a masterwork that can still leave first-time viewers gobsmacked some six decades later. After all, name another western that has a massive following among gay people.

Much of its appeal revolves around the fact that it functions on so many levels that it almost becomes a mirror to the individual viewer. First of all, it is a western, complete with many of the genre’s tropes: stagecoach holdup, bank robbery, hired gun, posse turned lynch mob, villain’s lair, barroom brawl, woman with a past, kid trying to prove himself—and of course Ward Bond. But it’s also a distinctly feminist film from an era when that was pretty outré: big bad Sterling Hayden may be playing the title role, but he and the rest of the menfolk tend to get shoved to the side while Crawford tangles with her nemesis, self-righteous hellion Mercedes McCambridge. And you don’t have to dig very deep to find a strong undercurrent of lesbianism; McCambridge may profess her love for alleged bandit Scott Brady, but we know it’s Crawford she really has the hots for, and knowing it’s not reciprocated makes her all the madder — in both senses of the term. That which we cannot have we wish to kill and all that. (The musical didn’t bother with such coding, replacing the climactic showdown with a good old-fashioned catfight. Those wacky New Yorkers.)

But the most fascinating aspect is its thinly disguised attack on McCarthyism. (This might be a good place to sketch out the plot for those who’ve yet to experience it. Crawford has built a saloon/casino on a tract of land



Joan Crawford gets caught in a stare down between Scott Brady (left) and Sterling Hayden. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

that sits right where the railroad is coming through. [She obtained this knowledge by “exchanging confidences” with a fellow in the know.] This doesn’t sit well with the townsfolk—especially McCambridge — who see her as a slutty intruder. Sensing that violence may be on the horizon, Joan engages Hayden as protection. And the battle is thus joined.) Those who’d been blacklisted could surely identify with the quandary of a lone person being cornered by a hostile mob; lines like “Just tell us she’s one of you and we’ll let you go!” couldn’t have been more blatant. It came by this naturally; though the screenplay (based on a novel by Roy Chanslor) was credited to Philip Yordan, he was mostly a front, with the bulk of it written by the blacklisted Ben Maddow. “High Noon” may have gotten there earlier, but “Johnny” arrived right in the thick of things. (In a case of art imitating life, the official head of the posse is played by Bond, who in real life was such a virulent anti-Commie that he alienated nearly everyone around him and ironically became almost unemployable himself, finally finding salvation in television as the star of “Wagon Train.”) And some 60+ years later, the armed horde howling for blood remains distressingly current.

It was not a pleasant shoot. As the owner of the novel’s film rights, Crawford was the de facto producer, and Republic, thrilled to have a star of her stature on board, deferred to most of her demands. She’d planned to work with esteemed director Nicholas Ray on another project, but when that fell through, she brought him along. Though Claire Trevor had been penciled in as her antagonist, Crawford felt she was

too pretty and opted for the less-lovely McCambridge (neither the first nor last time she'd pull this stunt). The two clashed immediately, which initially pleased Ray, thinking their animosity would make it seem more realistic, but it quickly spiraled out of control as Crawford realized her baby was being stolen right out from under her boots. It didn't help that the crew sometimes applauded Mercedes after a difficult scene, and one night a peeved Joan threw her street clothes into the, uh, street. (In fairness, McCambridge was battling the bottle at the time and subsequently admitted she contributed to the tension.) And Hayden wasn't spared, either; he later famously remarked that "there's not enough money in Hollywood to make me do another picture with Joan Crawford. And I *like* money." Nevertheless, Ray, no stranger to working with difficult actors — two pictures later came James Dean and "Rebel Without a Cause" — still managed to finish pretty much on schedule and budget. Despite the reviews, it was a substantial box-office success, one of the last for a studio that was losing its market as TV replaced the bread-and-butter movies it had thrived on.

Although Republic didn't make a lot of big-budget A pictures, they spared little expense on both sides of the camera on this one. Victor Young composed the intense score, including a title song with lyrics (and sung by) Peggy Lee, which became a sizable hit on its own. Harry Stradling Sr. was the cinematographer, with much of it shot in Arizona. (Amusingly, Crawford refused to subject herself to the desert elements, so all her "location" close-ups were filmed in the studio against rear projection, with a double used for long shots.) And Sheila O'Brien's costumes were notably unsubtle, from Joan's garish gunfighter garb to the blindingly white dress she wears opposite McCambridge's funeral garb.) Best of all, the supporting cast was filled with beloved reliables: John Carradine, Ernest Borgnine, Royal Dano, Paul Fix, Ben Cooper, Frank Ferguson, Will Wright, Robert Osterloh and Rhys Williams, among others.

The movie has some of the most quotable dialogue of any western, from "I never shake hands with a left-handed draw" to Crawford's famed retort to McCambridge's threat to kill her, which inevitably gets cheers from audiences, especially the afore-mentioned LGBTs, who relish the over-the-top fierceness of its two divas. And its influence is visible in movies as disparate as "Once Upon a Time in the West," "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," Truffaut's own "Mississippi Mermaid" and even "Support Your Local Gunfighter" (in which Cooper spoofed his own role).

For ages, it was only viewable in ghastly, mud-colored prints, thanks to the misnomer process it was shot in: Trucolor. (In fact, it was the last movie so filmed.) Paramount, which today owns the Republic library, had been prevented by legal entanglements from restoring the film, but they were finally resolved and with no small difficulty a new digital restoration was completed in 2013. It is an absolute revelation, with Ray's riotous color schemes now on full display; it's a cliché, but it didn't look this good in 1954. And in an era defined by cynicism and condescension, the honest and hard-earned delirium that is "Johnny Guitar" seems even more fabulous than ever, yielding new and endless delights with each successive viewing. Maybe Truffaut wasn't so severe after all.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Michael Schlesinger is widely acknowledged as the dean of classic film distributors, having spent more than 25 years at MGM, Paramount and Sony, keeping hundreds of vintage movies in theatrical release (and later DVD). He oversaw the completion of Orson Welles' "It's All True," wrote and produced the American version of "Godzilla 2000," co-produced such Larry Blamire parodies as "The Lost Skeleton Returns Again" and "Dark and Stormy Night," and has written, produced and directed several shorts featuring the faux-1930's comedy team of Biffle & Shooster.*