

High Noon (U) USA 1952

23 January 2023

DIRECTOR: **Fred Zinnemann**

Running time: 85 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Gary Cooper** (Marshal Will Kane), **Thomas Mitchell** (Mayor Jonas Henderson), **Lloyd Bridges** (Deputy Marshal Harvey Pell), **Katy Jurado** (Helen Ramirez), **Grace Kelly** (Amy Fowler Kane), **Otto Kruger** (Judge Percy Mettrick), **Lon Chaney Jr.** (Martin Howe), **Harry Morgan** (Sam Fuller), **Ian MacDonald** (Frank Miller), **Lee Van Cleef** (Jack Colby), **Robert J. Wilke** (Jim Pierce), **Sheb Wooley** (Ben Miller).

SCREENPLAY: **Carl Foreman** (based on the magazine story "The Tin Star" by John W. Cunningham).

PHOTOGRAPHY: **Floyd Crosby**. EDITING: **Elmo Williams**. MUSIC: **Dimitri Tiomkin**.

The most celebrated put-down of *High Noon* was that voiced by John Wayne, who, in a phrase freighted with meaning at the time, declared it was 'the most unAmerican thing he had ever seen.' What kind of marshal runs around asking for help when three badmen arrive in town? And what citizens, their spirits forged in the great migration, would refuse it? In so saying he revealed quite how much he had missed the point - unless he was attempting to blindside those who might not.

Will Kane is about to hang up his guns and marry a Quaker, a radically pacifist starting point for a shoot'em-up, though *Destry Rides Again* (1939) had a similar premise. The drama lies in the fact that, when Frank Miller gets out of the pen, Kane must face up to his past alone, knowing that even if he survives, his future happiness will be forfeit. It is widely known that a parallel fate befell associate producer and writer Carl Foreman, who lost the producer credit and the right to work in the US by refusing to clarify or deny his membership of the Communist Party. He reworked the specious arguments of industry professionals into the speechifying of the Hadleyville townsfolk, Stanley Kramer himself recast as Thomas Mitchell!

The film critic's take on the film has been that it is not really a Western at all, but an exercise in suspense, in the three unities, or a political allegory. Of course, it is all those things, too. The reasons for the film's perennial popularity among audiences lie not in its meditation on what makes a good citizen/American, but in the fact that it is a great story told by a top cast and crew without missing a beat. When Tiomkin remorphs the Tex Ritter ballad into a minute-long countdown to noon, and we revisit one by one the locations and characters we have spent an hour getting to know, we see all departments pulling together in a way that is rare in the genre.

The long middle section of the movie is a succession of encounters with the key figures in Kane's life until then: his deputy, the judge, the mayor, his former mistress, all of whom for reasons of their own want him to leave; stand with him they cannot, or will not, like those who initially pledge their help. Kane must stand alone, 'forsaken' even by his bride, for Foreman's subtext to work. Watching these skilfully written scenes, we are borne along with Kane on a journey of hope leading to disappointment, so that when he eventually steels himself for the showdown we comprehend the courage that it takes. This isn't John Wayne taking down his Winchester with a shrug in *Rio Bravo*, a film conceived as a retort to *High Noon*, but a man like us (we hope!), and Cooper is marvellous.

Many of the cast also have their moments of glory, but it is Katy Jurado, proud and principled, as the businesswoman who lives in a hotel (like a prostitute, therefore, we are meant to think), on the fringes of the community but tolerated for her wealth, who sticks in the memory. Incidentally, there is a fragment of unsubtitled Spanish in Kane and Helen's farewell scene that is sure to set brows furrowing, so here it is:

Helen: *Un año sin verte.* (A year without seeing you.)

Kane: *Sí, lo sé.* (Yes, I know.)

Perhaps the thing about *High Noon* is not that it is the greatest Western ever made, but that it is the greatest film that also happened to be a Western.

David Clare