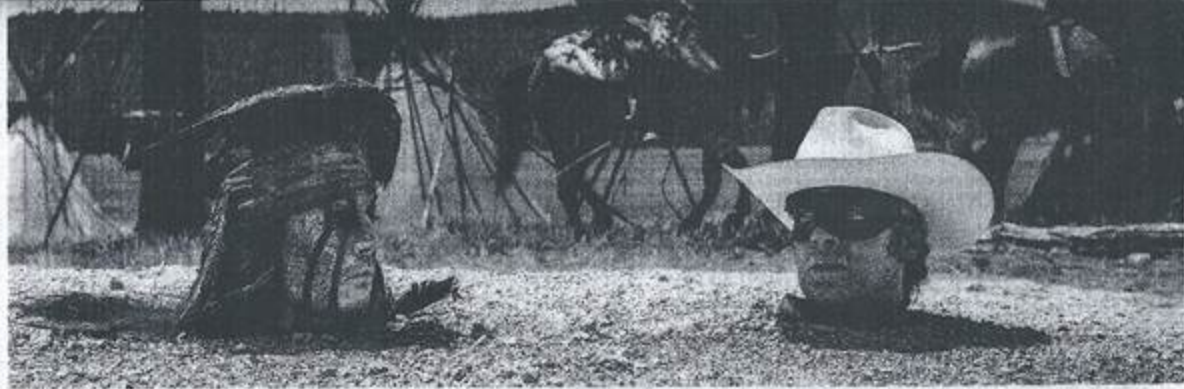


sense of compelling characters doing interesting things during the course of a coherent story. There's no coherence, no consistent tone and not so much a story as a succession of dim or dissonant notions interrupted by spasmodic events, some of them spectacular enough to be exciting while they last. Nor is there any reason to care about the masked rider on the white stallion; he's mainly Tonto's foil, a handsome boob played blandly by Arnie Hammer.

The most astonishing thing about this hugely expensive, famously troubled and notably violent production—shame on Disney for peddling such bloody stuff under the banner of a PG-13 rating—is that all of it truly does depend on Mr. Depp, a white man playing a mythic Comanche behind his own mask of aboriginal makeup. And all of it falls apart, since this Tonto, who can be delightfully droll, in the spirit of Jack Sparrow, is more often merely odd, in the spirit of his feathered hairpiece.

With a running time of 149 minutes, "The Lone Ranger" is so exhausting as to seem interminable. Yet it's quick to go off the rails, and we're not talking about the literal train wrecks that could serve as its emblem. The story starts with a framing device that must have been inspired by "Little Big Man" (Dustin Hoffman's 121-year-old hero recounting his story) except that this version is disastrously foolish and inept. Worse still, the same device is used to interrupt the narrative at several subsequent points, as if to guard against our emotional involvement, though that's never an imminent danger, thanks to the bizarre disconnections of the main action.

The film was directed by Gore Verbinski, of



"Pirates of the Caribbean" fame and vast fortune. He worked from a script, credited to Justin Haythe, Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio, that takes a revisionist tack in exploring the origins of the Lone Ranger, who first entered the popular culture via a network-radio series that ran from the early 1930s through the mid-1950s and spawned a TV series. This time it's Tonto who recounts the evolution of an earnest attorney named John Reid into a masked fighter for frontier justice. In doing so, the once-faithful Indian companion isn't just an unreliable narrator but a slyly ironic, pseudo-shamanic presence who, feeding nuts and seeds to his dead bird, may well be out of his gourd.

When Mr. Depp's minimalist humor works, it

works extremely well. In one instance, featured in a trailer, Tonto spies the still-to-be-named Silver, wearing his master's white hat and whinnying from a precarious perch on the branch of a tree. "Something very wrong with that horse," the Indian says.

Yet the wobbly narrative scheme leaves you wondering from minute to minute who Tonto is supposed to be—gadfly? satirist? poet? crackpot philosopher? tragic victim? superhero?—and the changes in his character reflect the random nature of the production as a whole.

Why, for example, is the horse up a tree? Why not is the answer, because this brief bit is no more arbitrary or absurd than some of the

most elaborate effects, which respect neither dramatic nor physical logic. Things just happen. Trains hurtle. A train crashes. Good guys on horseback chase bad guys through the cars of a passenger train, or gallop after them on the cars' rooftops. Another train crashes; it's like the subway car in "Speed," but out on the plains. Trains hurtle again. Tonto appears out of nowhere on a towering ladder, which serves as a crane over the train tracks in a slapdash approximation of an action sequence by Buster Keaton, who lived and sometimes nearly died by the laws of physics. If anything binds these events to one another, it's the filmmakers' almost palpable sense of desperation. Something very wrong with that movie. —J.M.

DVD Focus

Looking for a better western than "The Lone Ranger"? Almost anything with cowboys and horses qualifies, but here are three that may, or may not, leap to mind.

'The Ballad of Cable Hogue' (1970)

JASON ROBARDS STELLA STEVENS



Mention Sam Peckinpah today and people think violence—the splatting bullets and spattering blood of "The Wild Bunch." Mr. Peckinpah had a lyrical side, though, one that informed such earlier little gems as "Ride the High Country" (1962) and "The Ballad of Cable Hogue." In the latter film, Jason Robards is superb in the title role of a prospector and desert rat who nearly dies in the desert before discovering a freshwater spring and reinventing himself as an entrepreneur. Stella Stevens is charming as a whore with a heart of gold that beats to the rhythm of ambition.

'My Darling Clementine' (1946)



John Ford's classic western stars Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp and Victor Mature as Doc Holliday. The climactic shootout at O.K. Corral is followed by a coda in which Mr. Fonda bids adieu to his would-be darling Clementine (Cathy Downs), but promises to return. In the film's pre-release version, that promise is followed by a courtly handshake. In the final version, Earp gives the audience a bit, though only a bit, of what it needed by kissing Clementine decorously on the cheek. Joseph MacDonald's black-and-white cinematography is some of the most evocative camera work in Hollywood history.

'High Noon' (1952)



Another classic, directed by Fred Zinnemann from a screenplay by Carl Foreman. Gary Cooper's Will Kane is trying to retire but his conscience won't let him. Will is a small-town marshal whose new wife is played by Grace Kelly. It's his last day on the job, but when he learns that a man he sent to prison years earlier is returning on the noon train to seek revenge, he stays and fights. Mr. Cooper got the Oscar for best actor, but the film itself lost the best-picture contest (inexplicably) to Cecil B. DeMille's "The Greatest Show on Earth." —J.M.