

Twilight of the Beats

Last month we reviewed the 1973 French feature, **Two Men in Town**, in which Alain Delon is a former convict trying to go straight, who is continually badgered by an obsessed cop. We also reviewed a very fine 2014 American remake. Both films, however, are actually a partial remake of a movie Delon made in America for MGM in 1965, **Once a Thief**, which has been released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC# 888574144821, \$22). Like Delon's character in the French film, he also has a wife that he loves deeply, and in **Thief**, she is played with a stunning, nothing-held-back performance by Ann-Margret. Van Heflin is also sublime as the aging cop, who still lives with his mother, and the unsettling Jack Palance plays the hero's brother, a gangster who is trying to coax the hero into joining a high stakes robbery. The supporting players, including John Davis Chandler, Tony Musante, Steve Mitchell and Jeff Corey, are also terrific, to the point of being as unnerving as Palance in some instances. As for Delon, who is playing an Italian-American, he feels a little out of his element once in a while, but is persuasive and dashing enough to hold the film together.

Directed by Ralph Nelson and shot on location in San Francisco, the film is also something of a rarity in its capturing of the twilight of the Beat era. As censorship was starting to crumble, the film delves into the San Francisco underworld without blinking, depicting junkies and referencing other lifestyles that were considered risqué at the time. The movie opens in a jazz club with a breathtaking drum solo by Russell Lee that rivals anything you heard in **Whiplash**, and features an ultra-cool musical score by Lalo Schifrin. Although the jazz scene recedes as the story picks up speed, there is still enough on the periphery to sustain its milieu, and it is hard to believe that just 2 years later, everybody would be walking around town with flowers in their hair.

Like **Two Men in Town**, the 106-minute feature is mostly a downhill ride from an emotional standpoint, but the thrill of the performances, the captivating widescreen black-and-white cinematography, the succulent music, and the witty heist, will provide compensation for all except those who insist on happy endings. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is pretty much spotless, and contrasts are invitingly crisp. The monophonic sound is solid, and there is no captioning. Along with a trailer, there is a terrific 7-minute production featurette profiling Schifrin as he works on the film, including a conversation between Schifrin and a goateed Nelson.

Hammer and sickle western

Pier Paolo Pasolini has a small part in Carlo Lizzani's 1967 western, **Requiescant**, released in a combination Blu-ray & DVD set by Arrow Video (UPC#76013776093, \$40), but he cuts a striking figure whenever he appears on the screen. Leo Castel portrays a gunfighter who was raised by a preacher (which is why he blesses each man he kills) after his own parents were murdered in a massacre by an evil landowner, played by Mark Damon. Pasolini is a priest who guides a group of peasants and helps the hero at a couple of key moments. Shot around Rome (rather than Spain), the film does have gunfights and other violent scenes, but it is primarily about the slow dance that goes on between Castel's character and Damon's character as they gradually learn about one another and adjust the courses of their lives accordingly. Running 92 minutes, the story really sort of fizzles out at the halfway point, except for its obvious path to a conclusion, and it was only because Pasolini kept showing up that our interest was held. The same movie, told from his character's perspective, might have been a lot more interesting.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer looks okay. Wear is minimal and colors are reasonably strong. There is an Italian track, with optional English subtitles, and an English track, both of which are monophonic. We found that we preferred the Italian, not because of the dubbing, which is pretty good, but because Riz Ortolani's musical score sounded crisper and more stable on the Italian track. Along with a trailer, there is a good 14-minute interview with Castel, who provides a brief history of the film's production and talks a lot about Pasolini, and a 27-minute interview with Lizzani, who talks about his career, the film's production, and the cast and crew. He also has quite a bit to say about Pasolini, and explains that the film was designed to express communist sensibilities. Movies about how the working class was being exploited were often censored in the first decades after World War II, particularly if a filmmaker was taking advantage of government funding, but if that conflict was placed in the American West, they could get away with it. "The possibility of seeing in a western, fights and conflicts that we were passionate about, and treating them metaphorically, was something that I really liked."

The DVD replicates the material on the BD.

Real movies from Monogram

Monogram productions tend to be associated with cheap formula films. Some of the movies may have interesting approaches to specific situations and the stars in the center of them are stars for a reason, even if they are bargain basement stars, but the films can usually be seen as following some sort of genre template with endless but predictable variations. What is most surprising about the eight Monogram and Allied Artists productions gathered in the three-platter Warner Home Video *Archive Collection* set, **Wild Bill Elliott Western Collection** (UPC#888574298951, \$36), is how much the films are like 'real movies.' In all of them, the dramas are legitimately complex, and the hero's moral or ethical standards are often strikingly

compromised. The films still run just a little bit over an hour, but an amazing amount of story gets accomplished in that timeframe, and the stories are about conscience as much as they are about stopping the bad guys.

Calling Elliott 'Wild' is like calling the 6'1" actor 'Shorty.' He has the demeanor and stiffness of a news anchor, but the clarity of his diction and the firmness of his manner are not out of place when it comes to stoic cowboy heroes, and the deliberateness of his actions (at times, he boxes like the Marquess of Queensberry) can be quite exciting entirely because he is so controlled amid the wildness that surrounds him. He can act, too, allowing the problems his character is facing to intrude upon his facial expressions, and he is not by any means squeaky clean. He often breaks what can be considered cowboy hero credos, whether it is drawing first in a gunfight, or putting his own character's interests before others.

Three films appear on each of the first two platters, and two films appear on the final platter. There is no 'Play All' option. The black-and-white picture is usually in decent shape, with scattered but unobtrusive wear, and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning. The first seven films are in full screen format, but the final film is letterboxed.

Elliott plays a Wyoming rancher in the 1951 *Longhorn*, who is frustrated by the descending prices of his longhorn beef, so he travels to Oregon to buy a different breed and bring the cattle east (the opposite from the normal direction), to mix with his own herd and improve the stock. His friend is secretly working with outlaws to steal the cattle at the end of the run, but they save each others' lives during the journey and the friend's conscience starts to crumble. There is also a welcome array of supporting characters, each with his own personality and goal, and Phyllis Coates is one of the co-stars. Running 70 minutes, the film has plenty of action and adventure, but it is a genuine drama and not the usual template of good guy vs. bad guy conflicts with superficial archetypes.

The narrative really takes you for a rollercoaster ride in the 1952 *Waco*. Elliott's character, defending himself in a crooked poker game, is accused of murder and has to skedaddle to avoid the noose. He hooks up with a gang of desperados who have a pretty secure hiding place, and accompanies them on robberies where a couple of people are killed. Eventually he gets caught and is looking at the strong possibility of a noose once again, but one town is so desperate for law and order that they employ him as a sheriff instead (hey, it's logical if you're watching the film). He never does pay for having participated in all of those robberies, but the whole approach that the writers take to the story is so unusual that the 68-minute film, once again, achieves genuine psychological and moral depth in the conflicts that the plot generates.

Elliott's character gets so mad at two perfectly innocent cowpokes at the beginning of the outstanding 1952 *Kansas Territory* that he beats them to a pulp—okay, he is a bit wild there—because they claimed, unaware of the relationship, that his brother, living in another town, was a card cheat. He then receives word that the brother has been killed, and that he has inherited the brother's partnership in a gambling saloon. So, he goes to scope it out, and again finds, with steam coming out of his ears, that nobody in town has nice things to say about his late brother. All of these films have the same basic troupe of supporting actors, and those with certain looks and manners are inevitably cast as the villains. But here, that same casting slants your expectations, so that there is a great twist in the finale. Everything else about the movie is fresh and delightfully ambiguous, as well. You can't compare the 65-minute film directly to the big studio productions, but when you place it in comparison to other bargain studio westerns, and more importantly, if you as a viewer have been watching a lot of those westerns in a short period of time, then the film stands apart as an amazing accomplishment.

A fully enjoyable adventure from 1952, Elliott is a cavalry officer in *The Maverick*, charged with transporting a group of criminals to a fort with just a handful of soldiers, while the buddies of the criminals are trying to upset the journey. The heroes also meet a covered wagon being driven by Coates, who tags along, thus giving Elliott's character a foil, enhancing the personalities and psychologies of not only their characters, but a couple of others, as well. And Elliott's performance is wonderful, as his character tries to operate by the book, but continually gets nudged by life and necessity to adapt a different manner. Hence, the film, running 71 minutes, is this marvelous, straightforward action feature about bad guys chasing good guys through the wilderness, but it is also an engaging character piece where different individuals with different motives are thrown together under pressure. It may be a cheapie western, but it's the stuff classics are made of.

A mystery where the bad guy, although guessable, is not revealed until the end, Elliott's character is a gambler who learns that his father, a shipping company owner, has been killed and a wad of counterfeit money was found on him in the 1953 *Rebel City*. He goes to investigate, which pretty much amounts to walking into each store and flashing the counterfeit bill, asking if anyone knows anything about it. Pretty soon, though, people are trying to kill him. He then gets a job with another shipping company, run by Marjorie Lord, and keeps stirring things up until the conspiracy is unraveled. Running 63 minutes, it is pretty standard stuff, but there is some flair to it, and a few narrative twists and turns.

At the beginning of *Topeka* there is a say-it-isn't-so moment where you learn that Elliott's character is the leader of a group of outlaws who are robbing banks all over the place. Although the premise is similar to *Waco*, it