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Jack Morton

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Jack Morton

Peter Maynard's Blazing Saddles

With the tragic passing of young director Peter Maynard it is tempting to look to his older work. He has already given us great films. But to do so just as his newest film debuts is to undercut its power. Without a doubt, Maynard's most ambitious work, whether you appreciate the result or not, is as co-writer and director of *Blazing Saddles* (2022).

When Maynard announced his intention to remake Mel Brooks' 1974 classic spoof of the western genre, many, (this reviewer included) presumed this was yet another symbol of an industry so scared of risk and creativity that it would rather resurrect old properties than embrace new ones. Furthermore *Blazing Saddles* in particular seemed a bizarre choice. The type of western which it so joyously lampoons has long fallen from favour, replaced by the revisionist style, and the demands it makes of racial inclusion in the period would be better served with real stories of the Black experience in frontier America. But everyone had mistaken Maynard's true intent. He didn't want to remake *Blazing Saddles*, he wanted to make *Blazing Saddles*.

The writing process alone must have been extraordinary. Little is public knowledge. We know 14 different writers were fired from the project, while at least another seven quit. The most common reason for removal from the writing room was showing too much familiarity with the original. It was not Maynard's intention to copy out the original script, and recalling it from memory amounted to the same thing. Rather he was determined to engage in the full creative process of writing, revising, rewriting, and ultimately coming up with a shooting script that would lead to a film which was word-for-word, shot-for-shot, identical to *Blazing Saddles* (1974). Dave Chapelle, one of the only people in the room from the beginning until the end with Maynard, attempted to clarify this recently:

"At the start, he would say to these guys 'shut up, you're just stealing Mel Brooks' jokes'. And they'd be like 'Aren't we just stealing his whole movie?' And then Pete would stare at 'em for like a minute and a half straight, like he was taking the time, each time, to consider whether that were true. Then he'd kick them the fuck off the project. Afterwards he'd look at the rest of us and go 'Anyone else think that's what we're doing?' And there's a room full of Jews, Wanda [Sykes] and me just quietly shaking our heads. Not 'cause I had any idea what he was talking about, but because I know better than to single myself out. But you know what? By the time we finished, I got what he meant. I'd be like 'this

guy didn't pitch a line, he just remembered what Cleavon Little said.' And that wasn't what we were doing."

They eventually ended up with a script that satisfied Maynard. Interestingly the shooting script, which has since been made available, is far from being identical to the final script of the 1974 film. Ryan Reynolds, playing Jim 'the Wako Kid', recalled the amount of improvisation that happened on set. "I'm used to that. Try different takes, someone has a better joke, someone else tries to top that. But nothing like shooting *Blazing Saddles*. We'd spend all day to get one little interchange right." Maynard's process seems designed to keep shooting until the dialogue of the 1974 film not only came up spontaneously, but also demanded to make the final edit, not because it aligned with the original text, but because it was genuinely the best option.

But before the shooting process could even begin, Maynard had to secure funding. While Warner Brothers had given the go-ahead to pursue the project, once Maynard's intent was fully understood, there was much consternation. "They wanted a more modern script, a new style of shooting, different casting... the biggest question we got was simply 'why?' you know, 'what's the point in doing this at all? The movie exists!'" recalled co-producer Donald Kischott, "In the end we got to keep the rights basically because Mel [Brooks] was on board, but we were left looking to fund the thing ourselves. I can't tell you how many people made some crack like 'Are you trying to film *Blazing Saddles*, or live *The Producers*?' People didn't get it."

They did secure funding, but the questioning of their purpose never stopped. Film and cultural critics from the top of the industry on down hounded the project. A collective licking of lips happened with each casting announcement or leak from set. The release of the trailer dominated the news cycle with commentators tripping over each other to express their take on the film's butchering of a classic, its political incorrectness, or its dated appearance and humour. But more than any other response came a demand to know 'why?' Some have been as savage with their criticism now that they've seen the film, calling it "A waste of time and money" and "More offensive to film-lovers than the original was to sensitive audiences". Uncomplimentary comparisons to Van Sant's *Psycho* were made. Hadley Freeman wrote in *The Guardian*: "They'd have been better off doing *Young Frankenstein*. This is a soulless, joyless resurrection of a film which, until now, lay well-remembered and, while problematic, still cherished."

Yet this is not a consensus opinion, and others, regard *Blazing Saddles* (2022) as a modern classic, rivalling the original in importance to film history, and sheer entertainment value. No one can answer the question 'why?', even before he passed,

Maynard was famously reticent to comment on his work. However, perhaps it is possible to address why the film worked today, and why it was worth making.

To begin, it is important to establish something about the 1974 film. The biggest thing separating the characters in *Blazing Saddles* is not the Blackness or whiteness of their skin. Nor is it the blackness or whiteness of their hat, whether they are a 'good guy' or a 'bad guy'. The biggest distinction between characters in *Blazing Saddles* is their era. Some characters are stuck in the 19th century past, with its language and attitudes. Others have a 70s sensibility, complete with new ways of speaking, new kinds of jokes, and new attitudes towards race and other issues. It does not divide evenly between the heroes and the villains. The main antagonist of the piece, Hedley Lamar (played by Harvey Korman) lives in the present. He uses Yiddish words like "putz" and "schmuck" which wouldn't have entered an Anglo-American's vocabulary in the 1800s, and is aware that "cut them off at the pass" is a tired cliché, which it only is because of 20th century westerns. Meanwhile the people of Rockridge, are the victims of Lamar's violence, and despite their antagonism to Cleavon Little's heroic Bart when he arrives, learn to accept and even celebrate him. But even once their attitudes change towards Bart, their language retains its outdated sensibility. Jessamine Milner's elderly woman doesn't hesitate to use the very racial slur she insulted Bart with in their first interaction when apologizing later. Olson Johnson (played by David Huddleston), in welcoming Black and Asian labourers into the town of Rockridge refers to them using the same slurs their oppressive overseers used in the first scene of the film. Some characters are stuck in the past, while others are from the 70s when the film was made.

The distinction is extremely apparent in the use of the N-word, present throughout the film. The period characters use it often and casually to refer to Black people, whether insulting them, or simply talking about them. The characters from the 70s rarely use it, but when they do it is in the reappropriated sense, as when Charles McGregor's character, Charlie, uses it when Bart returns in his role as sheriff. (Setting up the fantastic joke: "They said you was hung!" "And they was right!") Bart himself uses it twice, once when cheekily quoting the words of a period character back to his subordinate, and again when he has adopted the persona of a period villain to hold himself hostage. The outlaw cowboys use the term frequently, but Hedley Lamar, despite being perfectly comfortable taking advantage of racism, and sending Bart to his death, never does.

While in contemporary mainstream films, such as *12 Years a Slave* or *BlackKlansman*, it is not uncommon to hear villainous white characters using the N-word, it is rare to hear it used, as we do in *Blazing Saddles* by white characters with whom the Black protagonist, and we as the audience are meant to sympathize. It helps that these

characters are ruthlessly pilloried for being ignorant (Jim calls them 'morons') and inbred (Everyone's surname in Rockridge is Johnson), but ultimately what makes it work is the depiction of these characters, their language, and their attitudes as part of an imagined past which a 1974 audience can mock as outdated nonsense.

In making *Blazing Saddles* (2022), Maynard did not attempt to mimic Brooks, by putting characters from the present into his period piece. Rather he deliberately repeats Brooks' choice, nearly fifty years later, and puts characters from the 1970s into his period piece. Jamie Foxx's Bart didn't walk out of a Kanye West music video, but rather out of the pages of *Ebony*. Bradley Whitford's Hedley Lamar isn't the enlightened, liberal, racist character he played in *Get Out*, he's the 'Not racist but practical' of Spencer Tracey in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. And as a result the distinction between the 19th century characters and the 1970s characters is more apparent than ever, as both feel dated to the modern viewer in completely different ways.

Consider the French Mistake sequence. The scrapping cowboys and townsfolk burst through a wall into another studio where a chorus of men in black ties and high hats are filming a dance number. All are portrayed as effeminate, and the flamboyant director repeatedly refers to them using a slur for a gay man. James Corden was originally cast to play the director, a role originated by Dom DeLuise, but left the project, stating publicly that he had expected the scene to be rewritten, and in his mind, it was "an unfunny, uninclusive mocking of a group of gay men". The juicy but brief role instead went to Neil Patrick Harris. Watching him, it is just as difficult not to cringe when he uses the slur as it is not to laugh when he shouts "Wrong!" to the dancer who messes up his choreography. You can see what Corden was talking about, the casting of Harris and other out-and-proud gay actors doesn't soften the slurs or stereotypes. And yet in the context of the whole film, it becomes understandable. In the original, the fourth-wall-breaking climax is set in the contemporary world of the 70s, 'look how far ahead our attitudes are of the 19th century "morons" now' the audience gets to think. 'See the cowboy actor leave to hook up with the dancer, it's a good gag, and beautifully normalizes homosexuality.' In Maynard's version the sequence appears as part of a climax set in 1970s Hollywood. Yes, it normalizes homosexuality, but it also normalizes the mocking of stereotypes and the use of harmful slurs. 'Look how far ahead their attitudes are of the 19th century "morons", while still being outdated and offensive today' we think. We are forced to question what ideas we hold, that will one day be equally outdated. Some critics still object to the scene, and perhaps they're right, but it cannot be said that it embodies prejudice without interrogating it.

Maynard made one choice in an arguable concession to modern political correctness. However, rather than undercutting his intent with the rest of the movie, it compliments it. I'm referring to the casting of Zahn McClarnon. In the 1974 film, Mel Brooks appears in warpaint and headdress as the chief of an unspecified American tribe, speaking Yiddish rather than an indigenous language. Maynard had intended to assume that role himself, and had already filmed several scenes as Brooks' other character, the governor. A studio executive, concerned about optics, convinced Maynard to bring in some indigenous actors to read for the role. McClarnon blew everybody away. Kischott recalled "we were all killing ourselves laughing at his governor. Then he did a take as the chief. I looked over at Maynard. I think he saw how perfect this could be, but feared it was going against his intent to make the original movie. We talked about it after McClarnon left, and I said 'aren't we engaging in a full, independent creative process? Well, as creatives, not thinking about Mel Brooks at all, that man is perfect.' And he was." McClarnon brings the house down as the chief, and his casting augments the original gag. Brooks appearing in red face and speaking Yiddish, besides just being provocatively humorous, is a comment on the fact that, in the films *Blazing Saddles* (1974) was spoofing, those roles did often go to white actors of Jewish or Italian descent. The use of Yiddish exaggerates the practice, making it ridiculous. In *Blazing Saddles* (2022) you have an actor with a Lakota background, who has spoken Lakota on film, instead performing in excellent Yiddish which goes, as in the original, subtitled. The scene hasn't changed, the gag still plays, and it has another layer of depth now. As an added bonus, rather than Maynard, who was not known as a performer like Brooks, we are treated to McClarnon in the role of governor Lepetomane. Not only does he surprise and delight in a goofball turn such as we've never seen from him, but his mere presence on camera brings a new dimension to certain scenes, such as Lepetomane's constant objectifying of his mistress. Played to make the supposedly powerful governor seem sex-crazed and unauthoritative in the original, it gains a new dimension, as the audience realizes that a person who looks like McClarnon behaving that way to a white woman would not only have been impossible in the 19th century, but would have at least raised some eyebrows in the 70s as well.

White women are just about the only women to appear in *Blazing Saddles*. In a movie bringing the Black experience to the western, the only woman of color is Bart's mother, seen in a flashback speaking no dialogue. There is no female lead of any race. Women do, however, play several important secondary roles. Carol Arthur plays Harriet Johnson, a buttoned-up school-marm, while Robyn Hilton never appears in anything but lingerie as the Governor's mistress, Miss Stein. Jessamine Milner is unforgettable as the elderly woman, and Madeline Kahn plays the Saloon performing, serial heart-breaking, rhotacismic Lili von Shtupp. And while this may sound like Madonna-Whore-Crone with

an extra serving of Whore, much of the humor from the characters comes from subverting those types. Harriet Johnson begins a speech inaudibly at a public meeting, and when the crowd makes it clear they can't hear, she apologizes meekly saying "I'm not used to public speaking." She then proceeds to deliver a loud harangue of a letter written to the governor, calling him the 'leading asshole in the State', at a volume which causes everyone to jump back. Jessamine Milner's first appears when Rock Ridge is being attacked. She is held by one villain while another repeatedly punches her stomach. "Have you ever seen such cruelty?" She asks, comically embodying the innocence and victimization of the people of Rock Ridge. However, when Bart greets her on his first morning as Sheriff, she instead embodies the ugliest racism those 'innocent' townsfolk harbour. Lili von Shtupp, with whom Lamar, Jim, and countless unnamed saloon patrons are enamoured is employed by Lamar to seduce Bart. After they spend the night together however, it is she who is obsessed by him, thanks to his sexual prowess and the fact that he's "a nice guy." The plot device of a woman seductress as an obstacle, and the hero proving himself by satisfying her is a misogynist framing. Though the consistent humour based around Lili's speech pattern makes it difficult to think of the character as sex object, patriarchal symbol or anything other than hilarious gag character played extremely well. Ultimately, while the women of *Blazing Saddles* undercut the genre's expectations of them, none has enough of a role to assert themselves except through their relationship to men, such as Lili standing up for Bart, or Milner regretting her prejudice towards him. Harriet Johnson gets to deliver a punch which knocks a villain crashing through a shop window in spectacular fashion. But while the women subvert the tropes of the genre, they can't escape them in the way the Black lead does. All of those limitations exist in Maynard's version as well. Is this an intentional demonstration of the failings of the 1974 film? Or a real failing on the part of the 2022 film?

These and similar questions are constantly at play. The result is a subtler, denser film than the original. That is not to say a better film, but perhaps a more impressive one. Consider the scene where the townsfolk of Rockridge are presented with a deal to help them save their town. In return the railroad labourers want "a little piece of land to call their own". Olson Johnson says they can accept the Black and Asian workers, "but we don't want the Irish!" "Everybody" Charlie insists, "No deal" Bart declares, and Johnson agrees "Aww prairie shit. Alright, everybody." Smiles on their faces, the townsfolk and railroad workers shake hands and mingle. When that scene was written in 1974, it could expect a laugh for the Irish joke, augmented by the shock value of the white actor using racial slurs, and then a positive feeling from the audience as well. Cleavon Little, our hero dispatched into the West from modern times hasn't beaten the villain yet, but he's done something harder by beating the prejudices of the townsfolk. His victory is the sweeter

because it is the true story of America. Inclusion has come about, the 70s audience thinks, and we've gotten to the point where the exclusion of people based on race seems as foreign as the exclusion of the Irish based on nationality. To the 2022 audience, the Irish joke still lands, the slurs might garner a shock laugh, or simply be discomforting, but when friendly mingling starts, can they join the celebration and back-patting? Do they see themselves in Bart, Jim and Charlie, the anachronistic characters who have brought some modernity to the West? Do they genuinely believe the actors, like Foxx and McClarnon feel they live in a post-racism world? Or are they reminded how polarising an issue immigration still is in 21st century America? Do they wince, noticing that despite twice hearing a slur for a Chinese person we have yet to hear an Asian actor speak in the movie – noting both the lack of representation, and their own failure to notice until now because it is still so common? Doesn't the idea of the inclusive America embodied by Olson (played charmingly by Dean Norris) when he smiles and waves his hands feel as much a dated fantasy in 2022 as the tough but righteous West did in 1974?

It is tragic that Maynard, who suffered privately from colon cancer, didn't survive to see the world's response to his film. It has been controversial, but one feels it's a controversy Maynard would have cherished. While *Blazing Saddles* (2022) is arguably a great film in its own right, it may yet contribute in another way to film history. For what filmmaker will now approach any remake without the legacy of Maynard's work, both positive and negative, upon him. It is too early to say, but much as Brooks' film killed the idealistic Hollywood western, Maynard's may have done an even greater service by killing the Hollywood remake.

In the last shot of the film, Bart and Jim ride off into the sunset to a choral rendition of the irresistible theme. In Brooks' film, they dismount, give their horses to a handler, and get into a car, reminding us one last time, that world is the past, we have moved on. In Maynard's film, they dismount, give their horses to a handler, and get into a vintage 1970's car, reminding us one last time, that this film is the past, we have moved on. Audiences will continue to revisit Brooks' film, and some will return to Maynard's as well. But will they flock to the next remake of an old favourite or reboot of an existing franchise? Perhaps. But they will not do so without wondering whether the film was truly made today, as Maynard's *Blazing Saddles* was.