

THE OLD

Ed Harris ditches revisionism and journeys to the western of yore with Appaloosa

THESE DAYS, WESTERNS ARE THE POLAR bears of the film world: a genre that no one wants to see go extinct but whose existence is still mightily precarious. They're also a symbol of less complicated times although, sadly, increasingly rare sightings are more often than

not dishevelled, gaunt shadows of their burly forerunners. Outside Clint, any modern-day filmmakers who brave the elements to tackle the genre does so knowing that they're likely to meet with a box-office reception as icy as the rivers they ford, as harsh as the vast, open terrain they're celebrating.

All of which makes Ed Harris a very brave man. Eight years after *Pollock*, the grizzled character actor has stubbornly

defied the bean counters and gone and made himself a bona fide western for his sophomore directorial effort. Not only that, he's ignored all the recent evidence that we want our old west myth-mining served with 21st Century trimmings — *The Proposition*, *3:10 To Yuma*, *The Assassination Of Jesse James*, *Deadwood* — to craft a genre helping so old-fashioned it could have served as a vehicle for Gary Cooper. The question is: why so traditional?

**'I DIDN'T
WANT TO
MODERNISE
ANYTHING'**
ED HARRIS



COUNTRY

— roping his *A History Of Violence* co-star Viggo Mortensen along for the ride...

“Because one of my intentions as a director was not only to be authentic to the period but to be authentic to the genre in terms of its classicism,” says Harris, who immersed himself in movies such as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *High Noon* and “some of Clint’s stuff” while preparing for *Appaloosa*. “I didn’t want to modernise anything; I wasn’t going to tell it in a way that would make it more exciting for anybody. I’m not some guy who’s gonna go

whizzing the camera all over the place. I just wanted to let it happen...”

Appaloosa is based on a 2005 novel by crime writer Robert B Parker. Harris picked it up in a Los Angeles bookstore and took it with him on a horse-riding holiday to Connemara, Ireland. He was instantly drawn to its tale of laconic lawman Virgil Cole and his even more laconic sidekick Everett Hitch, who are hired to protect the titular town from the bullying >>

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**





The enforcers: (clockwise, from left) Viggo Mortensen as Everett Hitch with Jeremy Irons as villain Randall Bragg; Ed Harris' Virgil Cole meets Bragg; Renée Zellweger as the boys' object of affection, Allie French.



reign of a law-flouting rancher. Just as swiftly as the book snared his interest, the 57-year-old Oscar winner also knew exactly who he wanted to play Everett to his Virgil, the taciturn, soul-deep friendship at *Appaloosa*'s heart. "If he couldn't have done it, I don't know if I would have made the movie," says Harris, chatting to *Total Film* in a hotel suite at the Toronto Film Festival, where its big names have assembled for *Appaloosa*'s world premiere.

"I was at the Toronto Film Festival when *A History Of Violence* premiered here," recalls Mortensen, "and, after the press conference, Ed handed me a book in a very Ed kind of way: 'So I have a book... could be a movie...' I read it and I felt the same. I like westerns – I have some old favourites – but I think 99 per cent of

'I THINK 99 PER CENT OF WESTERNS ARE TERRIBLE'
VIGGO MORTENSEN

them are horrible. They're terribly acted and not very interesting. But the ones that are good are really good. And this one had the makings of a really good western."

Like Mortensen, Renée Zellweger and Jeremy Irons were also quick to mount *Appaloosa*, as, respectively, flirty widow Allie who arrives in town with one dollar to her name and the pitiless rancher who makes everyone's lives a misery. "We spoke for five minutes and it was a done deal for me," says Zellweger, grinning at the memory. Irons adds, "It's a dream of any actor who grew up watching westerns to actually be in one... Westerns deal with big subjects in an almost poetic way, subjects which are dear to

all of us because they're about humanity, about how people interact, how people behave, what their moral decisions are."

But as cosy as the casting process was and as chummy as the autumn shoot in New Mexico turned out to be ("These guys are kind of fun, especially when they're riding around on horses in chaps and hats," coos Zellweger), Harris can get a bit riled when pressed on the transparent themes that can be mined from the genre. The cliché is that most westerns are really just love stories between two men – and *Appaloosa* fits that description like a holster fits John Wayne. What does Harris think about the relationship of Virgil and Everett? "Ed cut all those scenes," jokes Mortensen, who says the story is more "*Jules Et Jim* in the west" for him.

"Well..." groans Harris, "they've been riding together for 12 years and the strongest bond between the two of them is that they keep each other alive, they watch each other's backs. Yeah, they do love each other. Neither of them would ever dare to mention that word but there's an unspoken appreciation between the two of them..." He pauses, then adds, "Virgil loves Everett, but he loooovvvvvs Allie." "So get that straight!" laughs Mortensen.

On to Allie French, who poses such a threat to Virgil and Everett's macho love-in that she nearly drives a wedge between them when she makes a play for both men's affections. What's Harris' take on her threatening arrival in the small town of Appaloosa?

"There's no real place for her," argues Harris. "Where does she fit in, in terms of this rugged, lawless land? These are not domesticated men, these are itinerant lawmen who don't really have a home – their home is just wherever they are. There's a bond that's developed between Virgil and Everett in terms of relying on one another for their very survival, so where does a woman fit into that?"

With Parker's book and Harris' adaptation revealing little about her backstory, Zellweger admits that she never really got to grips with why Allie behaves in the "deeply questionable" way she does. "She was a complete mystery to me," muses the actress. "I had no idea whether the conclusions that I drew about her were correct. One of the first things that we shot was the scene when Cole asks her if there's a Mr French and I went in that morning and I thought, 'Well, is there?' I just wasn't sure. I kept waiting for things to reveal themselves as we moved along and I've never had that experience before. But I liked her that way. I couldn't judge her."

Apart from reuniting *A History Of Violence* enemies Harris and Mortensen as the trigger-happy marshals, why is Harris convinced the back-to-basics approach will dent the comic book-seeped mindset of modern moviegoers? Again, he gets a bit tetchy.

"Look, this film is made to be enjoyable," he growls. "It could have been two-and-a-half hours long and I would have been happy with that, but I kept it to an hour and 47. I believe it's a story well told and yet it still takes its time. It's a character-driven story but it takes place in vast landscapes and I really wanted to feel that, I wanted to capture the intimacy of what was going on with these people and also never forget where they are and what period of time they were breathing in..."

Like we said, a traditional western. Which, these days, is about as untraditional as you're likely to get. Ed Harris might just have made the bravest film of 2008... **TF**

Appaloosa opens this autumn and will be reviewed in a future issue of *Total Film*.