

## HOMBRE

*The best small Western of all time? \_\_\_ 9/10*

*Novel by Elmore Leonard*

*Screenplay by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr.*

*Directed by Martin Ritt*

Paul Newman ... John Russell  
Fredric March ... Dr. Alex Favor  
Richard Boone ... Cicero Grimes  
Diane Cilento ... Jessie  
Cameron Mitchell ... Frank Braden  
Barbara Rush ... Audra Favor  
Peter Lazer ... Billy Lee Blake  
Margaret Blye ... Doris Blake  
Martin Balsam ... Henry Mendez



*John Russell: Lady, up there in those mountains, there's a whole people who've lost everything. They don't have a place left to spread their blankets. They've been insulted, diseased, made drunk and foolish. And you call the men who did that Christians and you trust 'em; I know 'em as white men and I don't...*

*Jessie: Russell, if nobody ever lifted a finger until people were deserving the whole world would go to hell. We'd better deal with each other out of need and forget merit. Because none of have too much of that, not me, not you, not anybody.[1]*

Hombre is one of those movies that sneaks up on you. It starts out quietly in the Arizona badlands where John Russell (Paul Newman)—who we learn later is a white boy raised by the Apache—stealthily stalks and traps a herd of wild horses with two of his Indian compadres.

Upon reflection, the symbolism of that scene is striking: Russell shortly after outsmarting the horses into captivity is told that the white man who came to care for Russell at some point in Russell's early life (and gave Russell his name) has died. The old man has willed to John a boarding house and a gold watch... both symbolic of settling back into the white world.

The metaphorical question is whether John Russell will now be outsmarted into an alien cultural captivity like the horses. He sits at the barrier between the white and Indian cultures, and lives as much as possible like his Apache friends—wild and free in nature. It's clear he considers the Apache his people. But with one foot in the white culture, and now, with the inheritance, he's wondering about putting both feet back over there with Whities.

Encouraging Russell to come back and settle into the Caucasian ways—with property and safety and comfort and even a fair amount of social status—is his Mexican-American[2] friend, Henry Mendez (Martin Balsam). Mendez is a fascinating character in his own right, a "don't make waves, go along to get along" kind of fellow. He runs the stagecoach business in the small, dirty little town... a business on its last legs thanks to the railroad soon to be built through there.

Russell listens to his friend Mendez, and recognizes the similarity of their plight as men vis a vis the whites. But Russell is more inclined to see the racism and the injustice, and to resist it. He is not about to play nice to get on the power structure's good side... and harbors a deep resentment for whites as a people. The authorities have run his San Carlos Apaches either into reservations, where they are systematically starved (by the Bureau (cracy) of Indian Affairs) or into the mountains where they starve for being unable to produce food on barren land.

So we don't know what he's going to do. By the way, the sets for this movie step you into a time and place machine... and they're authentically configured. The conversational scene between Russell and Mendez occurs immediately following the horse-capture scene; they converse inside a dilapidated, bare-bones combination stagecoach-station/bar-and-grill establishment. Man, it had to be a rough, grimy, and smelly existence back in the day—before daily showers and deodorant.

Russell's early presence out there in the first station out of town enables him to display some badass maneuvers vs. a couple of the local hired-hand thugs (one of whom we're going to encounter later out on the stagecoach trail as a robber flunkie). It's an economical way to establish Russell's ability to "cut it" as a man of action in this multicultural menudo.[3]

Next, the film develops the feminine element. We go into town, where Jessie (Diane Cilento) has been managing the boarding house for Russell's old man. She knows that Russell is coming in to look over his property, and tries to make it presentable... by kicking out her frequent sleepover sheriff friend, Frank Braden (Cameron Mitchell) and trying to patch up the young marrieds—Billy Dee and Doris Blake (Peter Lazer and Doris Blye)—spats, using genuine words of wisdom to both. Jessie has been around the block, but is none the worse for wear.

As far as this reviewer is concerned, Jessie is 10 shades of hot—btw, Diane Cilento was nominated for an Oscar for best supporting actress in the movie Tom Jones and was married to Sean Connery from 1962 to 1973—a woman who not only looks good but is worldly wise and still likes men... of a certain kind. She's confident she can have Russell eating out of her hand within a few days, but it all falls through in a heartbeat. She realizes Russell is, indeed, the certain kind of man she likes, but too much so.

Despite a lot of good arguments—she will manage the place "lights-out"[4] for him, he'll receive \$300 a month hassle free, she'll work her pretty little buns off, be completely honest, and there's a coy hint that she's willing to be his girl on his terms—he stubbornly decides he's going to sell. This guy has more sales resistance than a monk. So Jessie is out on the street. I love the way she doesn't whine or carry on, merely accepts the fact and straightforwardly makes to move on. In fact, she joins Russell and the Blakes at the main stagecoach depot for a final run to Bisbee.

Exactly why the Blakes are leaving I don't remember, but prior to the assembly at the depot, enter the educated elite couple, with more money than good sense: Dr. Richard Favor (Fredric March) and his wife Audra (Barbara Rush). She marches in and makes it clear to Henry Mendez that she and her husband must leave on a stagecoach that night. He demurs, stating he doesn't have any stock, but she insists and offers him basically a month's worth of earnings to get a team and coach together. Word gets out that a special run is on... and that's what draws Russell, Jessie, and the Blakes to the station on short notice.

We'll get back to the Favors, but basically Dr. Alex is the incarnation of everything Russell regards as unjust and racist in white society. The man is highly elevated in the Bureau (cracy) of Indian Affairs and has the responsibility for the monies used to feed, house, and clothe the inhabitants of the reservation—which are Russell's Apache people. Hint: Dr. Alex helps himself to some creative filtering of the federal funds. Audra, is exquisite as his trophy wife whose idea of excitement is raising her nose in social standing relative to all the "savages" about her.

Before the stage gets underway, though, a perfect sleazeball "savage" brute, played by Richard Boone, pops in. Cicero Grimes—talk about a canted name—is too late to acquire a ticket, and the stage is loaded to capacity. No problem, he blusters to the people in the waiting room, starting with John Russell, that he will be taking someone's ticket. Russell proves a hard case. No dice. But while Grimes is harassing Russell the remaining passenger, a returning soldier, says to Grimes, "Why don't you leave him alone? Get your own ticket."

Grimes proceeds to intimidate the soldier man into giving up his ticket. So the stage is set, forgive the pun, with the Favors, Jessie, Russell, and the Blake girl, with Grimes wedged in beside the snobbish—but feisty—Audra. (Billy Lee Blake works for the stage company, and rides shotgun up on top with driver Mendez.) And the film is now fully ready to unwind. Like *Ship of Fools*, or another movie reviewed on these pages, *They Shoot Horses Don't They*, the characters first become known to us and to one another in close quarters... then later we watch them become who they are through an intricate morality play on the desolate, desert panorama.

What sets *Hombre* apart, as in so many works of cinema, is the writing. Leonard brings universal impact to the behavior of believable archetypes in an isolated, remote place where people stand out. It reminds me of what Robert Pirsig<sup>[5]</sup> once said about Montana and other sparsely populated areas: the more physical distance between individuals, the less emotional distance... and the corresponding greater value of both individuality and community.

Elmore Leonard and the screenwriters also insert special moments to humanize and entertain. I've already mentioned the man-to-man discussion at the beginning between John Russell and Henry Mendez; the idea is somewhat striking (especially in 1967): that individual men from different subcultures of the dominant white culture can develop personal relationships as familiar and friendly as what we'd see in an ordinary WASPish middle-class neighborhood.

Then there's a brief but somewhat gender-liberating scene where the three women—after the stagecoach has been held up and the civilized people must walk their way to safety—sit down in the shade and discuss men. Audra reveals how marrying for money or social standing leaves a lot to be desired in the hunka hunka burnin' love department, and young Doris Blake lets on that her experience with men is disappointing: "They're smelly and mash you, and they make disgusting noises all the time." Jessie (Cilento) gets the good lines, standing up for men in general and liking the good ones, even enjoying the physical aspects of love.

The scene is cleverly efficient, properly directed... and one realizes one seldom sees (especially up through the 1960s) more than a couple of women having a sit-down, respectful conversation with one another... absent the man factor. I realize their conversation bears on men, but the writer affirms for the women an independent existence, and to my mind it is an exceptional, poignant moment in film.

Finally, Russell and Jessie exhibit a sexual, even romantic tension that accentuates the moral tension that brews between them, with Russell taking the masculine, black and white approach and Jessie countering with feminine—not weak, mind you—sentiments of compassion and tolerance. Their characters also dance with intelligent humor. In many ways they see themselves in each other, and it makes them laugh in self-realization.

The behavioral subtleties are woven throughout. Like the books of Larry McMurtry, you never want to put down the plain, deep characters so colorfully drawn. Romantic realism in the Ayn Rand sense? More like romantic realism in the real sense. Thoroughly enjoyable movie, can't wait to read the book.

[1] I included this last sentiment to catch any sleeping Objectivists out there in Cyberville. You probably remember Ayn Rand and her regular excoriation of the "morality of altruism," which she often characterized as the placement of need above merit. This movie, especially in its culminating scenes, gives would-be altruist excoriators something to think about.

[2] An interesting thought is whether Mendez would be considered a Mexican or an American in late 18th-century southern Arizona. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) ceded the lands of the modern US Southwest from Mexico to the United States. Initially, Mexican citizens who lived in these areas were to be granted either a) American citizenship within a year or b) the right to retain Mexican citizenship. Though that agreement seems to have been clouded and reneged upon by the US government; details are unclear to me. In any case, Mendez would probably have been considered a Mexican and treated by whites as a second-class citizen.

[3] Menudo is a Spanish term for a kind of soup.

[4] Lights-out is a phrase from geekdom meaning something will run by itself without any need for human attention.

[5] Author of the culture-bearing book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974).

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