



History with DeMille at the Wheel

By Christina Harlin, your Fearless Young Orphan

The Plainsman (1936)

Directed by Cecil B. DeMille

If you don't know it by now, then let me clarify it beyond a doubt: Cecil B. DeMille doesn't care about facts. His

movies are a ton of fun, but he treats history like his own fan-fiction playground. He takes the characters he likes and their real histories and uses them as a framework for his own overwrought delight. In *The Plainsman*, DeMille tells the story of Wild Bill Hickock (Gary Cooper), Calamity Jane (Jean Arthur), and Buffalo Bill Cody (James Ellison) as only DeMille could: almost completely wrong, revisionist, frequently racist, and still embarrassingly entertaining.

In the year before the Battle of Little Bighorn, Wild Bill, Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill are all trying to make themselves fit into the civilization that is spreading westward. Each of them up until now has had a feasible place in the "wild" west; now that the "wild" is being tamed, they don't fit in precisely. Calamity Jane attempts to make a living as a stagecoach driver, but as her name indicates, trouble seems to follow her around. Buffalo Bill marries a nice woman and tries to settle down and keep out of skirmishes with the native population, but the military keeps calling him back to service. And Wild Bill, well, I'm not sure what he's trying

to do. Keep away from Calamity Jane? She broke his heart once. Keep away from fighting? Seems like he's had enough. Avoid his own questionable celebrity status, for doing things he's none too proud of? And yet, here's Jane, just as sexy as ever, and anywhere he goes, there seems to be an army on the move, and everywhere he goes, all the same, someone recognizes him and wants him to work. Someone always needs the assistance of a good plainsman who can shoot the hell out of things.

The plot of the film basically involves a villainous gun-runner named Lattimer, who is selling repeating rifles to the natives, which allows them to fight back more effectively against the people who are invading their homeland. Oh and by the way, the natives are the badguys in this story. Yes, I know that Lattimer's actions sound heroic and the natives' cause sounds just, but that's because you're not Cecil B. DeMille, who seemed to think that any white cause was the right cause and that the natives should have behaved themselves better. That's the racism I mentioned earlier. See, in this film, General Custer is a hero, and the Natives really just get what's coming to them.

It's a problem because DeMille, besides being a racist dick, was a fantastic director. Unfortunately, one of the movie's most thrilling scenes involves a few of Custer's soldiers pinned down in a gun battle for six days by a river, with the natives on all sides picking them off slowly until Custer comes to the rescue. It's a nail biter until you remember that the "villains" of the moment are just people who are fighting off invaders who are breaking promises and driving them to near-extinction. Whoops.

DeMille has a bad tendency to portray Native Americans as grim, terrifying, savage, brutal and, worst of all, stupid. This is where you'll have to make a personal judgment call about whether you can bear to watch this kind of thing or not. I don't like it one bit myself, however I find DeMille's films so preposterous that taking offense just seems pointless; like the nonsense of the film is so obvious that it rather sabotages itself. But if it really does bother you, be warned.

The best things about *The Plainsman* are its characters, who have wonderful relationships between them (plus well-written dialog and great actors to support



I don't know about you, but I like my Gary Cooper done medium-well.

those relationships). Wild Bill and Calamity Jane are in love, though both a little too wild and independent to settle down and admit it. Their love-hate, on-again-off-again passion is sexy and tense, though it probably has little if anything to do with real historical characters. It's just a couple of really attractive eccentrics swapping vibes. Jane is outright accused of being a traitor when she gives up information to the natives, just to keep Wild Bill from being tortured to death, and Wild Bill is forced to protect her even though he's furious with her for it (geez Bill, no gratitude at all? The woman kept you from being burned alive!). That kind of emotion plays to the romance-novel fan in me. Likewise, Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill, set at odds with each other based on their sworn duties to the military or lack thereof, have a believable friendship and respect for each other.

Somehow the film does manage to end up in Deadwood, where of course we know that Wild Bill meets his unhappy fate. If you're a fan of western lore, you've got to see this film for no other reason than to discover how DeMille manages to

turn Wild Bill's death over a card game into a heroic sacrifice made to stop the sale of repeating rifles to natives. No, seriously. This is fan fiction at its finest: keeping the story in its confines while still managing to go completely off the rails. I was rather surprised that DeMille didn't have Wild Bill survive the incident somehow, if only to finally get him married off to Calamity Jane. Someone's got to make an honest woman out of that one!



Looks like someone has a date with destiny.

A good companion film for *The Plainsman* is DeMille's breathy and preposterous film *Unconquered* (also on the Wild Wild West discussion page), which is not as good as this but is a great deal funnier and has some great, often breathtaking scenes. As for *The Plainsman*, giving it a rating is a puzzling problem. It's a great film that is frequently about terrible things. I can forgive its baloney, but can I forgive its bullshit? I give it a 7/10.