

Broken Arrow (1950) Critique

“Broken Arrow” is a product of its time but attempted to transcend it with a progressive view of American Indians compared to its contemporaries. Consider that in 1950, Indians were pretty much always seen onscreen as red-skinned savages brought in to imperil the white heroes. Their lack of individual identities, or even basic humanity, made them operate much like zombies did in later horror films — as an existentialist threat.

They were literally the red menace.

Directed by Delmer Daves, “Broken Arrow” was written by Albert Maltz (Michael Blankfort received the screen credit because Maltz was blacklisted at the time). Although Jimmy Stewart opens the story with the narration that “everything you see is true,” the film is in fact a highly fictionalized version of the events surrounding the peace treaty signed by Apache chief Cochise, based on the novel “Blood Brothers” by Elliott Arnold.

The plot is pretty straightforward. Tom Jeffords (Stewart) is a gold prospector and former Army scout who befriends Cochise during his long war with America. He persuades the great chieftain to refrain from attacking the mail carriers who carry the post through the Arizona territory. This leads to a tenuous armistice and eventually a peace treaty, though renegades on both sides continually work to stoke the fires of war.

The film goes out of its way to present a realistic portrait of the Apache people, from their bloodthirsty reputation as warriors to their strong belief in truth and loyalty, exemplified by Cochise himself. The story opens with Jeffords captured by the Apache for prospecting in their territory, but they let him live because he healed a wounded apache youth.

However, just as their encounter is about to end, some other prospectors stumble along. Jeffords is gagged, bound and forced to watch as the Indians decimate the white men. Two survivors are buried in the sand and their faces smeared with fruit juice to attract ants. Though the actual depiction of the torture is oblique, even the description is horrifying. However, the Apaches did not act without cause; scalps of their tribe mates were found in the prospectors’ saddlebags.

This sequence sets the tone for Jeffords’ early encounters with Cochise, who is a hard man but a fair one. He’s played by Jeff Chandler in an outstanding performance that earned him a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination. (Blankfort/Maltz and cinematography Ernest Palmer also earned nods from the Academy.)

Chandler was a Jewish-American with dark, brooding good looks that, much like Anthony Quinn, lent him to ethnically exotic roles. Giving the lead role to a Caucasian is somewhat ameliorated by the fact that most of the other Indian characters in the movie were portrayed by actual Apaches recruited from nearby reservations.

Jay Silverheels, a Canadian Mohawk best known for playing Tonto on television's "The Lone Ranger," has a brief but powerful appearance as rebel chief Geronimo, who defies Cochise's breaking of the arrow, signifying peace with the white man.

I should note, however, that the real Cochise was nearly 70 during the events depicted in the movie, while Chandler was barely into his 30s. Cochise died (of natural causes) not long after the signing of the peace treaty, which — like most of the promises made by the U.S. government to native peoples — proved to be fleeting

The film suffers from an ill-advised (and historically bogus) romance between Jeffords and Apache maiden Sonseeahray (played by Debra Paget, another dusky-skinned Caucasian). Their courtship and marriage ends up dominating the entire middle of the film, and her death, though tragically portrayed, feels inevitable and cheap.

"Broken Arrow" ends rather abruptly, with Jeffords wandering off into the mountain country, heartbroken but filled with resolve that his wife's murder "put a seal upon the peace."

Of course, nothing of the sort happened. In real life, Jeffords became the Indian agent for the territory, though he was later removed from his position via a political campaign by his enemies. He rambled around, working as a stagecoach driver, lawman and prospector.

I don't mind the historical inaccuracies of "Broken Arrow," but the love affair feels like it was dreamed up in the office of a studio chief worried about the story not having enough appeal for women moviegoers. The friendship between Cochise and Jeffords, and their attempt to forge a peace neither of their peoples wanted, is strong enough storytelling material to not need the addition of gratuitous smooching.

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