

## Wyatt Earp

An epic is a work of art (originally poetry) in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero. It contains elements that recur in the American movie Western, often mythic in its themes and inevitable in its narrative progress. The word has been thus applied to the best of Hollywood's westerns (those of Ford, Hawks, Peckinpah, etc.), and it has been most recently consigned in pre-release publicity to director Lawrence Kasdan's ambitious new film *Wyatt Earp*. Has he truly achieved the grandiosity and loftiness required of a motion picture epic?

Obviously, the legendary and historic aspects of the definition are fulfilled in the story of Earp, probably the most storied gunman-lawman of our storied West. His tale, which started as a fictive biography in the 1930's, has been filmed a dozen times in the sound era, most recently in *Tombstone*, released only six months ago. But is this a true "work of art" in the "elevated style?" This depends enormously on whether you accept star Kevin Costner as embodying the stoic yet tragic figure Kasdan obviously wants to create in *Wyatt Earp*. I, for one, found Costner studied rather than sublime, adequate rather than epic.

The film, which is at least epic in its length (more than three hours), is tripartite, its first third showing the young Wyatt coming to adulthood. He is shown imbuing sturdy maxims from his father Nicholas (Gene Hackman) such as: "Nothing counts more than blood; everything else is strangers," and when faced "with viciousness, hit first and hit to kill." In California, his first gunfight makes him vomit, but a stretch in Wyoming Territory forces him to confront a Bad Guy and introduces him to the handgun. He later follows his father in studying the law, and he marries his first sweetheart, who dies of typhoid carrying their child. Wyatt is devastated and degenerates into a drunk and a horse thief, staring at a jail cell's ceiling with a cockroach crawling on his chest. Nicholas finds him and bails him out to find a new life.

In this section, Costner can appear, in almost the same scene, as both a mellow contemporary American out of his element and a genuine callow youth hesitatingly delivering his lines. Here, as in the rest of the movie, if you are a Kevin Costner fan, you'll be thoroughly satisfied. If, however, you hope to see delineated a character with potential for growth and complexity, you may be disappointed.

In the second third of the film, the Wyatt Earp of legend is fashioned, first as an efficient buffalo hunter, then as a slick faro dealer and a deputy marshal in Wichita and Dodge City. He reconnects in Dodge with his brothers Virgil, James, and Morgan, and makes his reputation as a grim-faced lawman, hard as stone and trusting no one. There is an interlude with the Masterson boys, Ed and Bat, and their presence in the script serves principally to contrast the gentler law-keeping practices of Ed Masterson (Bill Pullman) with Wyatt's pitiless attitude towards "viciousness." This section also introduces Mattie (Mare Winningham), a prostitute and common-law wife to Wyatt, and Doc Holliday (Dennis Quaid), the

roving dentist and card shark who befriends Earp.

Dennis Quaid provides most of the fun in this fundamentally somber motion picture. His appearance as the tubercular Doc is stunning and wraith-like (he lost 43 pounds for the role), and he gets the movie's best lines and delivers them with gusto and panache. (Example: "Tombstone--it does sound quiet, I'll give you that.") This is the smart-alecky and goofy southern-fired Quaid we have seen before in *The Big Easy* and *Great Balls of Fire*, and he is charming. His performance is memorable, while those of the Earp brothers and their whining wives run together in the mind. The cinematography of Owen Roizman, which moves in this section out of the great outdoors to concentrate on raw town interiors, specializes in earth tones, ranging from sagebrush-yellow to calf-brown.

The third section traces Earp's career in Tombstone, including the celebrated gunfight at the O.K. Corral. In this version, which tries to adhere more closely to actual history, the gunfight takes place in a vacant lot in the town, the shootout is close-up and messy, and it is short, taking less than a minute of screen time. Its aftermath, a hunting down of the Clayton and McLaurey gangs, consumes the last part of the movie and the vision is grim: Morgan Earp is shot down, Wyatt gets gruesome revenge on Ike Clayton in a railway yard, and there is a final shootout in a New Mexico gulch. Through it all, though Wyatt connects with his third wife Josie (Joanna Going in her film debut), the Earp clan is disintegrating. The film disintegrates also, as the gunplay (which has been relatively restrained throughout the movie) seems to take over. *Wyatt Earp* aims for an elegiac tone at its end, but it's more whimper than bang.

Costner has to carry all this, and it is quite a load. It is probably too much to ask, and his smooth modern image cannot convey the heartache and hardness that should mark his character. The film also runs long, Kasdan thinking perhaps that sheer length will add seriousness. Three hours is not necessarily too long for a film of this type, witness Costner's own *Dances with Wolves*, which whizzed along because of well-crafted scenes, a sympathetic view of the Lakota culture, and the presence of a character who was growing in the lush landscape he inhabited. *Wyatt Earp* is full of incident and full of characters (the screenwriters, Kasdan and Dan Gordon, wrote more than 100 speaking parts) but they just don't add up to "epic." It is full of competent and attractive actors whose time on the screen is minimal or pinched, especially actresses like Annabeth Gish, Isabella Rossellini, and Jobeth Williams.

*Wyatt Earp* is also replete with almost every standard Western movie set-up, from a stagecoach chase through a barroom brawl to furious gunplay. Maybe that is precisely the point. Movie fans that just like the Western as it has ever been, played straight and undemanding, with stiff-upper lip and taciturn ways, will cotton to this yarn just fine. No epic, maybe, but a healthy dose of the Old West, Hollywood style.

*("Wyatt Earp" is rated "PG-13 " for violence, suggestive situations, and mild profanity)*

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