

JOHN WAYNE THE GIANT OF THE WEST

by Steve Ditlea

Last summer John Wayne was shooting *The Cowboys* near Santa Fe, New Mexico and I went out to watch the action. The moment I arrived on the set I began to feel uneasy, almost wishing I hadn't left my familiar urban environment. Even the elements seemed to sense an alien Eastern presence as a sudden angry wind whipped up eddies of dust at my feet when I started to tread across the expanse of flatness separating me from the site of the day's first shot. Almost on cue, a leathery-looking cowpoke off to the side began to entertain his equally authentic-looking companions with the tinny sound of a battered guitar and his gravelly voice intoned a traditional Western favorite: "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee..." After his stirring rendition of the classic *Okee from Muskogee*, he launched into a less familiar tune with a refrain warning "if you don't love it, leave it..." As the hyper-American strains of his medley assailed my ears, the most dire expectations of a New York liberal seemed duly confirmed. But even William Buckley probably wouldn't feel altogether at home here, on what was so obviously John Wayne's turf, with its endless dusty desert nuzzling air-brushed mountains on the horizon, its newly built antiques log ranch houses, its hundreds of cows (or were they steers? I really should have watched *Rawhide* more when I was a youth) grazing under the watchful eyes of chaps-clad cowboys, and its corral chock full of more horses than in all of the stables in Connecticut. Was it the arid mountain air or mild paranoia that dried out my mouth as I came under the steady gaze of the wranglers on the periphery of the set?



The closer I got to the activity surrounding the camera, the denser the clusters of ranch hands, extras, doubles, publicity people, production assistants, grips, technicians and more than a dozen hangers-on who added up to the three-hundred-man (and-woman) crew on this large production. How odd that all these people should be so obsessed with titled nobility; the word "duke," always voiced with reverence, repeatedly cropped up within these highly diverse assemblies. Nearby, a handsome black and tan folding high chair stood in all its splendor, its leather back emblazoned with DUKE in bold embellished Western style tooled lettering. A fancy handcrafted chair bearing producer-director Mark Rydell's name paled next to this stately throne. There was little doubt that this movie location was Duke's domain, his aura suffusing every inch of the set, his benevolent and absolute power attested to by the fact that without him this would still be a barren plot in the middle of New Mexico.

In an era of extremely cost-conscious studios, *The Cowboys*, with its moderately high budget of six million dollars, ranks as the most expensive picture being shot in the U.S. last year. Of all the numerous kinds of movies, only the John Wayne Western, by now a genre in its own right, can be counted on to consistently do well enough at the box office to assure a return on such a sizeable investment. At a time when star vehicles have finally died out because audiences have grown more discriminating, no Wayne Western, no matter how mediocre its content, ever fails to earn at least five million dollars at the box office, with several grossing much more.

The Cowboys has everything needed for a good Western: A director with a flair for action, Mark Rydell (at right), hardy crewmen equipped to withstand the rigors of dust and wind, a beautiful lady of ill-repute, Maggie Costain (far right), the gun in its holster, and the man who can use it, John Wayne. Whether he's riding a horse or kicking a recalcitrant cowhand into shape (below), Wayne's the ideal Western hero.



This might seem surprising to most New Yorkers, accustomed to seeing Wayne pictures suddenly appear without fanfare in their neighborhood movie house and then vanish just as unexpectedly without even leaving a trace in third-run or revival houses. Unlike most movies, Wayne flicks make the overwhelming bulk of their money in the boondocks, where big John can do no wrong. Whatever his artistic or political opinions, almost no one in the film industry would even hesitate if given the chance to produce one of the Duke's Westerns, an opportunity akin to being granted a license to print money. It comes as no surprise that Warner Brothers, considered one of the more "hip" and progressive companies in Hollywood, agreed to finance *The Cowboys* twenty-four hours after the project was offered to them. The Duke can perform the impossible. Wherever his hand falls, the black ink flows, a rare sight these days. The way the veteran actor's nickname is respectfully intoned by people in the movie business, you'd think it was an honorary peerage bestowed by the grateful studios to one of the last stalwarts left in their tottering empire. In terms of what really counts in Hollywood, last year's belated Oscar was an insignificant accolade from an industry which has long honored the financial clout of John Wayne's name in movie deals.

If you happen to suffer from an intellectual's prejudice that film should aspire to Great Art, you tend to look upon most of Wayne's movies with contempt. Simplistic and one-dimensional almost by definition, they often serve as nothing more than a backdrop for the obligatory scenes of the Duke dealing out punches and hot

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lead to an unimaginative assortment of cardboard villains. While the genre has evolved to adapt to the star's advancing age, the resulting films are still depressingly predictable. If you happen to be a hopelessly hooked film buff, you tend to overlook such flaws at times. But you can't help but mourn, for gone are the days of John Ford directing classic movies around Wayne. Recent efforts by such worthy directors as Henry Hathaway (*True Grit*) and Howard Hawks (*Rio Lobo*) were hardly up to even the most indulgent auteurist's standards. If you've never lived in the rural South or West, you probably find Wayne's particular brand of charisma worn and rather tiresome by now. The image he projects of rugged, quarrelsome independence and unerring righteousness smack of simpler times and simple minds. His appeal grows increasingly parochial and dated. Should you be of the liberal persuasion in politics, the old cowboy star's political philosophy seems strangely anachronistic, to the point of being incomprehensible. Wayne's recent interviews so full of rugged individualism and unreconstructed conservatism show that he has changed little since the days of his involvement with the Hollywood blacklists in the Fifties. By most accounts, age has not mellowed his abrasive personality one bit. For any of these reasons, as I found myself wandering around his set, I had no real desire to meet one of the last of the legendary stars. Yet curiosity spurred me on to encounter him around the corner of the old barn I was now approaching.

Suddenly standing before him, he was so familiar, just as I'd seen him so often in two-dimensional reproductions, but for the first time, I got a sense of his imposing stature as he towered by almost a head above everyone around him. Some uneasy thought stirred in the back of my mind as I gazed upon this formidable figure. He was wearing a cowboy shirt the color of dried blood, a hide vest as lined and age-worn as the deeply etched face above it, pallid tan cotton corduroy jeans, a beautifully crafted Western belt, and a pair of tooled boots that would certainly be the envy

of any denim-clad denizen of St. Mark's Place or any serious shoe fetishist. The awesome possibilities of a Bunuel movie starring the Duke suddenly flashed across my brain.

And then an equally odd but suddenly obvious association hit me: John Wayne and Charles De Gaulle. The similarities became apparent as



"In this one," says Wayne, "I play a 60-year-old rancher with 11 kids under my wing and I try to get us all through a cattle drive. No actor in his right mind would try to match the antics of 11 kids on screen. But you know what—it's the greatest experience of my life."

soon as my mind was put on the track by the grandeur emanating from the tall stately profile bearing the same gracefully sloping paunch, and the same proud posture with head held aloft, eyes fixed to the horizon, seemingly unmindful of the painful betrayal by a once vigorous but now aging body. It's curious how, despite totally different origins, activities and cultures, both men came to embody the ethic of honor and pride and individualism. They may have represented living anachronisms to their contemporaries, yet they enjoyed wide popularity and grudging respect from even their enemies. Sometimes wrongheaded and seemingly irrational, they were stubborn and stuck to their guns. Who knows how alike they would have been had Wayne responded to the urgings of his well-heeled conservative friends to enter the political arena and

run for office. He never entertained political ambitions, realizing his own limitations. But voters can't always be counted on to be very perceptive. Today, Wayne could have been giving Ronald Reagan a run for the money to see who would be the first old movie actor to occupy the White House. Instead, Wayne was standing beside the mute Panavision camera, chatting with some of the crew as director Mark Rydell finished setting up his first shot.

Wayne's part in *The Cowboys* seems tailored just for him: portraying an aging rancher who can no longer find cowhands willing to take on the hard work of helping bring his cattle to market, he has ample opportunity to reflect on the way the old values are being undermined. With the year 1871, and all able bodied men off trying to make some easy money prospecting for gold, the old rancher can do little but grumble about how times have changed and resort to hiring ten youngsters, aged twelve to seventeen, cow-boys in the truest sense of the word. During the cattle drive, the kids grow up quickly under the cattleman's gruff guidance. Despite his often rough handling of them, when the old man is murdered before the end of the drive, the young cowboys avenge his death as if he were their own father. Quite appropriately, in death he becomes larger than life. The insufferable sadistic dim-witted rancher driving impressionable children and dumb cattle across the plains is transformed into a wise benevolent father-figure who fought and died to uphold his ideals and the rugged way of life of the American frontier. Although a little updated in feeling, with its appeal broadened by a few touches of tokenism in the persons of one Jewish youngster (played by the most Irish-looking kid you've ever seen) and a not-too-Tomish black cook (portrayed by Roscoe Lee Brown), *The Cowboys* is still old apple pie and corn in the Wayne tradition. Of course, director Rydell did a lot with his characters and even overcame some of the more cliched moments in the script, but it was too early in the shooting then to tell how the picture would come out. With the value placed on corn in mov-



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ies today, the quality of the film doesn't matter that much anyway. Already there was talk of *The Cowboys* opening in Radio City Music Hall, though over half of the film remained to be shot.

In a few moments the old rancher would be confronted by the father of one of boys going on the cattle drive. Wayne looked on attentively as his double and the actor playing the father ran through their movements for the benefit of camera and sound crews. Finally, it was the star's turn to step before the lights. Though he had faced the cold staring lens countless times before, you could detect unmistakable eagerness on Wayne's part as the moment approached for the first take. You could see the frustrated director in him as he scanned the surrounding equipment and props, sized up the scene and took mental notes on how he'd like to see it played. Rydell came up to him and spent surprisingly little time explaining how he wanted Wayne to read his lines.

The director took much longer with the other actor in the scene, meticulously going over every detail of intonation and emphasis in the words he would deliver. One of the crew confidentially whispered that the supporting actors always got extensive coaching while the Duke needed little direction, his acting style unchanged after all these years. The star's performance had been so uniform that Rydell had been satisfied with just one take of numerous scenes featuring his star. Having to do more takes due to other actors' erratic readings had often caused Wayne to become stale in a scene. Anxious to get everything right the first time around, the crew remained alert through the rehearsals.

With the lines repeated one last time, the actors could now assume their positions for the shot. Wayne was to start out standing in a hay loft in the attic of the barn when the distraught father walks in. After exchanging greetings, the old rancher comes down a ladder to speak to the father and exchange pleasantries before being confronted with the reason for the man's visit. The rest of the scene would be handled in other shots, requiring different setups with slight

changes in lighting and camera position. For now, all Wayne had to do was deliver one line from above and one line after descending the ladder. The command for action was given. The father entered and called out to the rancher. Up above Wayne answered him and after a beat, walked down the four steps of the ladder. As the



Although Director Mark Rydell and members of the crew worried about his health, Wayne insisted on doing most of the difficult riding stunts himself. "He captured everybody on the set," says Rydell, "including me, and I was prepared to dislike him."

father spoke, you could see the Duke stiffen, his face slightly grimacing under a forced smile. When it was his turn to speak, he took an extra beat, then delivered his words in short staccato bursts. The director called out "good take." Everyone relaxed. But Wayne was still visibly breathing hard, winded after the relatively minor exertion of walking down a few steps. Proud to the last, he turned away, trying to curtail his rapid breathing, hoping no one would notice how weak the once-mighty star had become.

Concern for the Duke's health dominated much of the crew's conversation during the interminable waits between shots. Everyone on the set was acutely aware that he was walking around with just one lung, the other having been removed a few years ago to save him from cancer, "the Big C"

as big John calls it. The seven-thousand-foot elevation of the mountainous location took its toll on everybody's breathing, but Wayne's problems with the thin air were rather serious. Any physical effort caused him to breathe heavily. The crew said they could no longer use a wireless microphone to record his voice. Taped to the star's chest, the sensitive microphone picked up wheezing and panting which was loud enough to drown out his lines in several scenes. Among the cast and crew even those normally not sympathetic toward the veteran actor (and there were a lot of them), sincerely worried about his safety and wished for his good health. Many were concerned that Wayne might insist on doing several difficult riding scenes himself. He has often expressed his pride in doing most of the stunts in his movies; he would seem reluctant to defer to his double or a stuntman for bits of action he used to have no trouble with. Some people were worried about one particularly strenuous fight scene to be shot several weeks from now; they all hoped that director Rydell could find a way to lessen the strain on his star. In the meantime, they had to stand by while the old cowboy actor decided how much he would tax his easily-fatigued body.

While waiting for some lights to be moved for the next shot, one of the crew offered to introduce Wayne, commenting that the actor has been known to vent his anger at a strange face on the set. With a firm handshake and a genuinely friendly manner, the Duke acknowledged the proffered introduction. Prepared for so long to dislike this embodiment of so much that is alien to me, I found myself disarmed by his attentive conversation and affable disposition. Asked the sort of question he's heard thousands of times before, he made a real effort to answer without being flip, his reply full of patience and good humor. As his ingratiating manner held me in its sway, I couldn't help but wonder how anyone could possibly attribute the sayings of a political neanderthal to this charming giant. Everyone fell under his spell as Wayne ambled around the set, stopping to



chat with anyone within earshot. No temperamental recluse, the Duke enjoyed standing on location through the long day, swapping tales with the crew and extras.

But if I and other journalists scrupulously avoided mentioning politics, an ABC television film crew was not so circumspect that particular morning. They interviewed him for an upcoming program on the role of the Indians in America. As someone who has wreaked more mayhem upon more Indians than just about any other Western movie star, Wayne qualifies as some kind of an expert on the subject, or so the TV newsmen seemed to think. With their puny newsreel camera shooting in the shadow of the mighty Panavision metal monster, they asked him his opinions on the Red Man. Suddenly Wayne was off and running, spouting lines about the "whining minority" on Alcatraz wanting hand-outs, and disputing the validity of the militant Indian's claims. Even when the interview ended, the subject continued to fester in his mind. For the rest of the day, at odd moments, Wayne would bring up the topic of minority group demands whenever there was someone around to listen. Waiting for the shooting to get under way again, he calmly announced that he was growing tired of everybody claiming to be part of some oppressed minority. With Agnewesque aplomb, he added that he longed for the day when he could "hate a nigger" if he wanted to. Like Spiro's fabled remark about the fat Jap, Wayne's comments were not meant to be racist. He rambled on, elaborating that he would like to be free to judge a man as an individual rather than by the label applied to him. But his explanation could not erase his unconscious racial slur. Most of his listeners drifted away politely, among them Mark Rydell, for whom discretion lay in not engaging in political arguments with his star. Many of those left listening to the Duke's monologue happened to be wearing caps with script lettering spelling out BATJAC, the name of Wayne's own production company. Though Batjac was not directly involved in the production of *The Cowboys*, the caps were the emblem of his retinue which included a personal photographer, a special photographer, his own make-up man and several gophers (the people who go for coffee or whatever else his heart desires). Judging from the reaction to his words, Wayne's personal attendants seemed to provide the only steady audience for his often outrageous political opinions. As long as he

has them around, he can continue to air his personal views without having to inflict them on some hapless member of the cast or crew.

With politics always kept in the background, Mark Rydell enjoyed a close working relationship with Wayne. He readily admitted to originally having doubts about his star, especially in view of their widely diverging philosophies, but declared himself pleasantly surprised at the way Duke's hard work and personal charm eased over any difficult moments. You could sense that Rydell, quite understandably, felt relieved that everything had worked out well with Wayne, the key element in the expensive production. When he first read *The Cowboys* as a novel, Rydell immediately wanted to turn it into a movie, and Wayne was his ideal choice for the lead. The director confided that with any other star it would have been much harder to find adequate financing for his film and he would probably have been forced to cut corners to substantially reduce his budget. When Wayne agreed to do the film, in large part because he admired Rydell's previous effort, *The Reivers*, the director knew that a lot would be riding on his ability to get along with the veteran actor. But Rydell had to make no special effort. He happily fell under the Duke's spell almost as soon as they first began to work together on the set.

That afternoon, Rydell eagerly introduced Wayne to Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, the writers responsible for *The Cowboys*' script. The director gleefully watched to see how quickly the Duke would win over his friends. After exchanging only a few remarks, the star had the two Eastern intellectuals eating out of his hand, regaling them with his experiences, playing the role of the old cowboy to the hilt. The scriptwriters were obviously awed by his every move. When he stuffed a huge wad of chewing tobacco into his mouth, they could scarcely hide their wonderment. Staring intently at the bulbous deformation of his cheek as his jaw worked away methodically, one of them hesitatingly asked what would happen if big John were to swallow his chaw. Pausing to savor their wide-eyed astonishment, he slowly answered that he would just take out more tobacco and start chewing again. Their amazement made him grin broadly. They couldn't help but smile too, realizing that their urban sophistication had totally deserted them and they had been openly gawking for the last few minutes.



The Duke and Sarah Cunningham who plays his scene to begin. Wayne directs Sarah's attention. "It's the kids' and

As the day wore on, some of Wayne's good humor faded as petty annoyances slowed up the shooting. In a medium close-up shot, the old rancher and the distressed father were to continue the morning confrontation scene. Everything was set for the star's return before the camera after painstaking efforts to get the right dramatic lighting. When Wayne assumed his position, a sharp-eyed cameraman called a halt to the proceedings. The Duke always wears very dark reddish make-up to enhance his rugged image; he's had his personal make-up man do it the same way for years. But in an era of film emulsions that are faithful to skin tones, the star's coloring looked artificial and made his protagonist appear pale by comparison. Sensing Wayne's annoyance, the director called for the make-up man to darken the supporting actor's face. One of the cameramen discreetly juggled with the lights to cast more brightness on the rancher's features. Big John bristled at the delay, unaware that he had brought it on by his insistence on a star's prerogative to have a personal stylist. Although some of his habits required extra work on the part of director and crew, no one dared try to make Wayne change his ways.

The dramatic high point of the



... of 40 years in *The Cowboys* stand by the table in the homestead waiting for a ... to the off-camera shenanigans of one of their film brood. "I'm just a hired hand in ... irector Mark Rydell's movie."

scene comes when the father confronts the rancher with the accusation that the old man would not be fit to lead his young ranch hands on the long and dangerous cattle drive. To prove his point, he accuses him of being a bad father, having driven his own sons to an early death. All of the actor's movements build towards the expression on Wayne's face as he reacts to the man's charges. The scene progressed well until the critical moment. Wayne's expression was almost deadpan, he was under-reacting to such a degree that you'd have thought he'd just heard a shaggy-dog story from his antagonist. It was a little too underplayed, even for Wayne's normally unflappable character. Rydell called for another take, then another, and several more after that. Each time, Wayne reacted with the obvious emotion of an iceberg. Still not content with what he was getting on film but aware of his star's growing impatience, Rydell decided not to force the issue over a relatively unimportant scene. He ordered the crew to get ready for the next set-up. Relieved, Wayne walked away to chat amiably with the actor who seconds ago was berating him.

A friendly technician entertained me with a story about a recent visit John Ford made to the set. He said that, although recuperating from a

broken hip suffered in a recent fall, the seventy-six-year-old director took full advantage of his stay to roam around and watch several days of shooting on *The Cowboys*. Looking at Wayne as he ran through a scene, Ford reminisced about several of the fourteen movies they had made together. He talked about his direction of Wayne to an assembled group of avid listeners, some of whom had worked as part of the crew on a number of his pictures. Ford candidly told them he'd had his problems getting the performances he wanted out of the Duke. Taking them into his confidence, he remarked, "that guy was one of the greatest stars I ever worked with; it's too bad he never could act." Therein lies the paradox of John Wayne. At best only a mediocre actor, he has become one of the most memorable figures to ever appear on film. Despite his obvious charisma, he should have faded from the screen like so many much more gifted actors. Yet he endures.

After a day of observing him at work, I could find no explanation for Wayne's longevity as a star. I watched as he stood straight and tall in the distance, signing autographs for some fans. As they hovered around him, I felt something was amiss in the familiar scene. And then I remembered the

other small groups of people who had been approaching Wayne throughout the day. Although the set was closed to outsiders, relatives, friends, and acquaintances of the local people working on the film had been allowed on for brief visits. These were not the nervous tittering teen-aged girls melting at the sight of a celebrity, nor were they excited middle-aged ladies mumbling about how jealous the girls back home would be when they heard about this. No, most of his fans were men, with the weather-worn faces and rough hands of hard workers, many accompanied by their families. As I stared at them, I noticed a look of reverence befitting a solemn religious occasion. As if on a sacred pilgrimage, they had come to have an audience with the Duke. They came near him in awe, visibly moved by his presence. Talking in a halting manner, they respectfully asked to take a picture of their family with him—I had visions of fading Instamatic color snapshots enshrined on mantelpieces throughout the Southwest. They treated his autograph like some holy relic, extremely careful not to fold or dirty the precious piece of paper clutched in their hands. When they summoned up the courage to speak to him, they always heaped praise and encouragement on him, sometimes adding that they would pray for his continued well-being. Wayne tried to ease the awkwardness of these encounters by making small talk, doing his best to show that he was still just plain folks. His attitude only served to redouble their wonderment as they discovered that this man who mouths the same homilies as themselves had not been spoiled by the lucre and luxury of Hollywood. He was one of them, perhaps the last star who represents the old ways and thoughts of so many Middle Americans living away from city and suburb. And they continue to love and respect him for down deep they know that when he disappears, they will no longer be able to see themselves embodied on the screen. At a time when "cultural genocide" has become one of the clichés of liberal thought, who will mourn when Wayne and the whole culture he represents vanish from view in the not too distant future? How many "concerned" executives at the studios will grieve for more than the loss of a big box-office attraction? No, I didn't cry crocodile tears as I thought of all this. I could only look back with very confused and contradictory ideas in my mind as I walked away from the mighty figure bathed by the golden rays of the painted Western sunset. O