H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rough Riders. Turner Network Television.

Reviewed by Ron Briley
Published on (June, 1998)

What Price Glory?

In 1968, New York Times film critic Renata Adler wrote a scathing review of John Wayne's <cite>The Green Berets</cite>, proclaiming the absolute end of the romance of war. Evidently, Adler never met John Milius who directed and wrote Rough Riders as a TNT miniseries, that aired July 20 and 21, 1997. <p> Milius is a talented filmmaker who brings alive the Spanish-American War of 1898, an oft ignored part of American history. The action scenes are well staged, and the acting is excellent, especially Tom Berenger who may be the embodiment of Theodore Roosevelt. But the film is a historical anachronism of the John Wayne (who never served in the military) view of war as glory that encouraged many young people from my generation to volunteer for service in the jungles of Southeast Asia (consider Ron Kovic's memoir, <cite>Born on the Fourth of July</cite>). <p> <cite>Rough Riders</cite> could easily have been made during the Second World War, as it has all the elements of this genre. First is the forging of a melting pot society (today we call it multiculturalism) in which Native Americans, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Anglos (both North and South), from every walk of life, come together to form a cohesive unit based on national pride. The war experience brings mutual respect across class and social barriers. Of course, this mythology does not reflect reality. What about the racist society of 1898? Did it just vanish? <p> A second key element of traditional war cinema is established when a group of disorderly recruits is molded into a disciplined fighting unit by a tough but caring noncom. In <cite>Rough Riders</cite>, Nash, an enlisted man, is an outlaw who despises his superior, Sergeant O'Neill. However, over time–much like John Agar's character with John Wayne's Sergeant Stryker in the classic <cite>Sands of Iwo Jima</cite> (1949)–the recruit comes to love and respect the soldier. When O'Neill dies, Nash–now a man–prepares to carry on the struggle. All of this male bonding excludes women. Men must prove themselves in a society apart from women, and Milius seems to accept the nineteenth century concept of separate spheres; women remain on the domestic front, while men venture forth to tame the world. The women of <cite>Rough Riders</cite> are prostitutes who give themselves to warriors, stand-by-your man types such as Edith Roosevelt, or shrews who drive the men out of the home by their complaining. Missing in <cite>Rough Riders</cite> is the story of women who had to feed and care for children, working and maintaining farms and businesses, while the men were off playing soldier. <p> Besides rehashing traditional film narratives, Milius is rather loose with the historical context of his work. He does present the role played by yellow journalists, such as William Randolph Hearst, in initiating the war, but fails to note that most historians believe that the Maine was destroyed by an ammunition explosion rather than foul play. Milius makes much of Spanish atrocities against the Cuban people, but both groups are kept in the background. This is America's story, but Milius fails to tell the entire story. <p> Milius believes that the Spanish-American War ushered in a glorious new page of American history. Or was this war simply a continuation of America's manifest destiny and expansion at the expense of Native Americans and Hispanics? In his tale of glory and valor, he omits how the war concluded with the Platt Amendment, making Cuba a virtual protectorate of the United States, and the Peace of Paris, allowing the United States to acquire Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. American Marines were soon dispatched to the Philippines on a military operation designed to put down the Aguinaldo Revolt opposing American annexation, while Puerto Ricans were inspired by the words of patriot Jose De Diego calling for resistance to the American conquest. The Spanish-American War appeared to many anti-imperialist critics, such as William Jennings Bryan, to simply make the United States another European imperialist power. This seemed confirmed when President Theodore Roosevelt seized the Panama Canal at the expense of Colmbia, establishing a legacy of Latin American suspicion regarding American motives in the region.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Ron Briley. Review of , *Rough Riders*. H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14872

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.