

## The Lone Ranger: Where is justice?

Christine Schofelt

16 July 2013

*Directed by Gore Verbinski; written by Justin Haythe, Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio*

*The Lone Ranger*, the story of a masked man and his Native American sidekick who mete out justice in a mythological American Old West, originated as a radio program in the 1930s and later became a long-running television series (1949-1957) starring Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels.

In that iconic series, after solving the given crisis in each half-hour program, the Lone Ranger, mounted on a white stallion, would cry, "Hi-Yo, Silver! Away!" And someone would generally ask, "Who was that masked man?" Famously, Rossini's *William Tell Overture* was used as the program's theme. This is the stuff of American popular cultural lore.

In keeping with contemporary Hollywood's broadness of vision and originality, *The Lone Ranger* has now been brought to movie theaters. (Two film versions based on the television series, *The Lone Ranger* [Stuart Heisler] and *The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold* [Leslie Selander], both with Moore and Silverheels, were released in 1956 and 1958, respectively.)

The newest version of *The Lone Ranger* unfolds at a leisurely pace compared with many of the other film and television blockbusters associated with producer Jerry Bruckheimer ( *Gone in Sixty Seconds*, *Pearl Harbor*, *CSI*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *National Treasure*, etc.)

The film, directed by Gore Verbinski ( *Pirates of the Caribbean* ). opens in San Francisco in 1933, where a young boy gains entry into a sideshow. There he sees a stuffed buffalo, a stuffed grizzly bear and what turns out to be a real live, very old Native American.

Of course, this is a wizened Tonto (Johnny Depp), and he tells the tale via flashbacks of how John Reid became the masked Lone Ranger. The story is jarringly interrupted a few times by the child in what is no doubt

meant to be a charming echo of the device used in *The Princess Bride* (1987). Still, the tale does unfold, with bad guys being bad guys, and good guys being good.

The proto-Lone Ranger himself--newly minted, by-the-book lawyer Reid (Armie Hammer)--is returning to his hometown, where his brother Dan (James Badge Dale) heads up the local Texas Rangers (the state's law enforcement agency).

Tonto and the despicable Butch Cavendish (William Fichtner) are prisoners on board the train. When Cavendish makes a break for it, Tonto attempts to alert the marshals in charge, to no avail. John Reid almost saves the day, though his refusal to shoot Cavendish--because of the importance of bringing him to justice under the law--leads to a pretty spectacular train wreck, which he and Tonto, now shackled together, survive.

Deputized by his brother, John Reid rides with a posse to recapture the escaped Cavendish and his gang. The group is betrayed by an old family friend, ambushed, and John Reid is the only survivor, wakened by a white "spirit horse." Tonto and Reid eventually join forces, though Reid's insistence on the rule of law tries Tonto's patience on a number of occasions in their continued pursuit of the gang.

In the process, we slowly learn that railroad baron Latham Cole (Tom Wilkinson) is leagued with Cavendish, with the aim of mining a rich silver ore, and they have the US Army on their side. Once Reid becomes aware of this, he dons the mask he'd been reticent to wear to fight for justice, stating that if Cole has the law on his side, he'll fight for justice outside the law.

The film clocks in at just shy of two and a half hours, and much of this is taken up with Depp's not-quite-comic turn as Tonto. He delivers his lines in a halting "Native" accent, and mugs for the camera inanely. This is a pity, as the backstory given the character could

have provided a platform for a sensitive and more convincing performance. While one does not expect Dustin Hoffman in Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), one does hope for more. Too, Helena Bonham Carter is for some reason allowed to repeat her by-now familiar Dangerous Woman In A Big Wig persona as Red, a lady of the evening who had also been victimized by Cavendish. Both of these actors deserve better roles.

There are some high spots in the film, including some subtlety unusual in a Verbinski film, and which might even have been accidental. For example, during a frenetic train chase near the end, Reid's love interest Rebecca (Ruth Wilson) and her son Danny (Bryant Prince) are imprisoned in a railroad car labeled "Liberty" while Cole runs amok, having hijacked the locomotive named "Constitution." One has to look fast to catch this, as there are no lingering shots, but it did provide this viewer with a dark chuckle while waiting for the next explosion.

Ultimately, though, the film is confused and fairly foolish. John Reid's transformation from somewhat nerdy, gun-shy lawyer to forceful Lone Ranger, while relatively convincing due to Hammer's performance, does raise the question of what is being promoted. It is tempting, given the cases of Edward Snowden and Bradley Manning, to read more into the dramatic situation presented than is most likely there. One would like to think that Bruckheimer and company are making an appeal to throw off the shackles of the robber barons of today and their willing and able servants in government. This is unlikely. And the events are so cartoonish such a theme would not make a deep impact, in any case.

It is a lot to ask that a film of this nature--a high-budget (\$250 million) reprise of familiar characters from children's television--bring depth to the screen. Hollywood has obviously decided that America needs a hero, a white knight to save the day. One has to ask why this particular trope in various guises (The Lone Ranger, Superman, Spiderman, Batman, etc.) is the go-to solution with ever-escalating budgets. These vigilante characters are not only outside the law, but also outside of society. They are permitted to do whatever they want, as long as it's in a good cause and they look somber while doing it.

Ultimately, the degree and regularity with which

hapless bystanders are subjected to train wrecks, explosions and mass shootings as these heroes pursue "justice" refutes the argument that the latter are fighting for the people.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:  
**wsws.org/contact**