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Review of Seven Men from Now

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Seven Men from Now
(Paramount Home Video, 12.20.2005)

Budd Boetticher is one of those directors, along with Sam Fuller, Jacques Tourneur, and Edgar G. Ulmer, who toiled most of their careers with low budgets but managed to stamp their distinctive personalities and styles on genre B-movies. Boetticher is best known for the seven Westerns he made with Randolph Scott between 1956 and 1960. Though working with much less money, these films almost match the Anthony Mann-James Stewart Westerns from the same period for their mythic qualities, the complexities of their characters, and the expert widescreen use of the landscape. *Seven Men from Now*, the first Boetticher-Scott collaboration, is generally considered to be the best in the series.

Seven Men from Now opens with Ben Stride (Scott) gunning down two men inside an Arizona cave. Screenwriter Burt Kennedy, in the first of his many Westerns, keeps Stride's motives vague, not revealing them until almost halfway through the 78-minute film. Stride encounters Annie Greer (Gail Russell) and her wimpy husband, John (Walter Reed), as they travel by wagon to California, and Stride and Annie are immediately attracted to each other. Further complicating matters is the arrival of Bill Masters (Lee Marvin), whom Stride clearly does not trust.

Seven Men from Now is typical of Boetticher's economic approach with few scenes and little dialogue. While the director does not have a showy visual style, he calls attention to both the beauty and danger of the setting, especially with some unusual angles during a shootout on a rocky hillside. There is also a remarkable shot of the Greers driving their wagon away from Stride, with the receding hero framed between the couple to underscore the new emotional distance between them.

Rather than have Stride act out of some simplistic manly code, prevalent in Westerns before the fifties, Boetticher and Kennedy do everything they can to make him question his every move. In the film's best written and acted scene, Masters reveals the cause of Stride's quest, taunts the ineffectual Greer, and calls attention to the sexual tension between Stride and Annie. Marvin, almost a decade before he became a star, gives one of his best performances. Boetticher allows the actor to get away with several bits of business, such as pausing or turning his head for no obvious reason.

Budd Boetticher: An American Original, includes some of the same talking heads, including Quentin Tarantino, Clint Eastwood, and Taylor Hackford, as *Budd Boetticher: A Man Can Do That*, shown on Turner Classic Movies on December 21. Tarantino points out that Budd, the Michael Madsen character in *Kill Bill*, is named for Boetticher. While the TCM documentary offers an overview of the director's life and career, the DVD version focuses primarily on *Seven Men*

from Now, with almost as much attention paid to Kennedy by critics Blake Lucas and Kevin Thomas.

There are also extras on the short, sad life and career of the alcoholic Russell and on Lone Pine, the area two-hundred miles north of Los Angeles where Boetticher shot four of his films with Scott. James Kitses, author of *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah*, offers a rather dry commentary, reading from a script. He discusses how the director dealt with the limitations of the stoic Scott and peps up when talking about Sergio Leone's debt to Boetticher.

Though the 2000 restoration of *Seven Men from Now* was shown at the New York Film Festival, this widescreen transfer is uneven, with some breathtakingly crisp scenes, featuring deep blues and greens, and some assembled from faded sources.—Michael Adams