



The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976).

Production: dir. Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros.

Certificate: 18

Run time: 135 minutes

If you liked this try: *Broken Arrow* (1950), *Ride the High Country* (1962), *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964); *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Little Big Man* (1970), *Dirty Little Billy* (1972), *High Plains Drifter* (1973); *Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *True Grit* (2010).

The Outlaw Josey Wales comes at the end of a cycle of 'revisionist Westerns' that began in the early 1960s and really bore fruit in the 'New Hollywood' period. This period, rising out of the collapse of the American studio system, responded to and against the innovations and ideas of the Italian Neo-realist and French Nouvelle Vague movements, embracing director led projects made by independent production companies to make more nuanced, innovative, and adult orientated fare than classical Hollywood had been allowed to make, with the former studios acting as financier-distributors. While lower budget film production was aimed at a correspondingly low paying teenage audience, these prestige pictures were aimed at an audience that saw itself as literate and mature, who were prepared to pay a higher ticket price, at least periodically through the screen year. These prestige pictures were both a flagship for the status of the ailing studios, and an economic life-raft upon which their precarious finances depended. The end of Hays' office censorship in the 60s and the institution of age certification in the US, allowed a new freedom for R rated films to express themselves in terms of sexual and violent content, but also in political and social content, which in the wake of the 60s allowed Hollywood to reflect the changing attitudes of the times in both its contemporary settings, but also to reassess understandings of the American past which until then had been givens, including a dirtier and more morally ambiguous vision of the American West.

Clint Eastwood emerged as a star through his portrayal of Rowdy Yates in the CBS TV series *Rawhide* (1959-1965), but when in 1963 his co-star Eric Fleming turned down an unpromising role in a low-budget German/Spanish Western remake of Akira Kurosawa's samurai movie *Yojimbo* (1961), Eastwood seized the opportunity to play a more morally nuanced character than the traditional Western good-guy role he'd played for TV. For the next four years Eastwood would be intermittently involved in filming, and later redubbing for US audiences, Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and its two sequels. Once a dubbed version of the film was released in the US in 1967, and its sequels sold to United Artists, Eastwood was a bone fide film star (ranking fifth largest box office star of 1968) and indelibly associated with anti-hero roles. Having been initially warned that Leone's films would be a 'bad step' Eastwood formed Malpaso productions in 1967. Over the following decade the company produced films for directors Don Siegel, John Sturges (who himself had made a western remake of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954)), and Michael Camino, all starring or directed by Eastwood, including his directorial debut the stalker thriller *Play Misty For Me* (1971).

The novel *The Rebel Outlaw Josie Wales* by Forrest Carter arrived at Malpasso unsolicited, and appealed immediately to Eastwood. It's anti-authoritarian themes and positive portrayals of both defeated confederate troops and anti-unionist Native Americans (Carter's ancestors were ostensibly Cherokee confederates) pitted against ruthless and corrupt government agents allowed the protagonists to be discernible as the heroes of the piece only by dint of the obvious provocation which motivates their desperate misdeeds. The story allowed for both a grubby underdog outlaw aesthetic popular in the post-hippie counter-cultural milieu, and for Eastwood's more right-leaning libertarian sympathies to be satisfied. The film's casting of actors Chief Dan George (*Little Big Man* (1970)), Will Sampson Jr. (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1976)) and Geraldine Keams (*Twin Peaks* (1991), *Reservation Dogs* (2021)), sympathetic portrayals, and use of the actor's first nation languages and phrasing was still contentious in the 1970s. In 1973 Marlon Brando had sent Sacheen Littlefeather to the Academy Awards to turn down his Best Actor Oscar for *The Godfather* (1972) in 'protest at the negative treatment of American Indians by the film industry', to a mixed reception of boos and applause from the celebrity audience. As Littlefeather gave her speech John Wayne, reportedly intent on stopping her speaking, had to be restrained from assaulting her by security. Following the film's release and the publicity campaign for Forest Carter's best-selling mystic memoir *The Education of Little Tree* (1976) and his Wales sequel, the author was identified as Asa Earl Carter, a KKK organiser and segregationist speech writer in the 50s and 60s and right-wing Democratic gubernatorial candidate as late as 1970. Carter died in 1979 and never discussed his past other than to deny he was Asa Carter. Whether he reinvented himself after a genuine political / racial epiphany, or if he even genuinely believed his own professed Cherokee roots (his family are divided in this belief also) remains unknown. None of this was known until after the release of the film.

Cinematographer Bruce Surtees worked on many Malpasso films for Eastwood and Siegel, and his signature dark style—showcased so well in his Oscar winning photography for *Lenny* (1974)—is evident in the film's interior sequences and tightly framed silhouettes – but the open landscape sequences, and individuals moving against vast canvasses, also stand out here.

Malpasso initially employed director Philip Kaufman who had recently made a cinema verité style revision of the James brothers legend *The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid* (1972) also set in the fallout of the Civil War and who went on to direct *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), *The Right Stuff* (1983), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988). Kaufman wrote the screenplay with Sonia Chernus, guiding the film through pre-production, but days into filming it became obvious Kaufman's style was anything but spontaneous and observational as his previous film indicated. Eastwood insisted on Kaufman's removal from the film, and assumed the directing role, for which he is credited on the film. This usurping led to the Director's Guild's 'Eastwood rule', that whenever a director is removed from a project the role cannot be assumed by anyone already employed in the production and a dual directing credit cannot be given.