

New ‘Lone Ranger’ Aims To Breathe New Life Into Hero

BY FRANK LOVECE

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NEW YORK — Legend tells of a band of men operating on the frontier, where the rules were still unwritten and a hero needed to be born. “I see him as sort of a lone operator,” said one. “He could even be a former Texas Ranger.”

“That’s his name!” cried another. “The Lone Ranger! It’s got everything!”

And so, in perhaps the earliest account of his creation — written just six years after the character’s 1933 debut in the pioneer days of radio — Detroit station co-owner George W. Trendle and station manager Harold True had that exchange at a meeting with writer Francis “Fran” Striker, director James Jewell and others. The subsequent series about a masked Old West vigilante and his American Indian sidekick ran for more than two decades, and a baby boomer TV series thrilled kids through the 1950s and in reruns beyond.

Since then? Aside from a couple of Saturday morning cartoons and a few ill-conceived films, there’s been nothing on-screen. So how is it that the name is still known — so much so that Walt Disney Pictures would gamble more than \$200 million on a big-screen adventure, which opened Wednesday?

“I don’t know,” muses director Gore Verbinski (“Pirates of the Caribbean,” “Rango”), speaking by phone. “I think it was so part of the zeitgeist back then, and it was so strong that the echoes are still here — iconography like the silver bullet and his mask and the white horse and the ‘William Tell’ overture. So I just think a lot of that stuff stayed.”

Among those things was the Lone Ranger’s famous cry “Hi-yo, Silver” as he rode off into the sunset after each adventure. (“It wasn’t ‘Hi-ho!’ as many people think,” the show’s announcer Fred Foy told the *Boston Globe* in 1993. “It was, ‘Hi-yo!’”)

As with other long-running characters depicted in a multitude of media, that iconography gradually evolved, and fans disagree on canon. The new movie harks back to the best-known account, that of a 20th-anniversary radio broadcast, where Capt. Dan Reid, his younger brother, John, and other Texas Rangers are betrayed by a scout and ambushed by the outlaw Butch Cavendish. Left for dead, John Reid is saved by Tonto and avenges his comrades.

In that scene in this movie, Reid awakens on a rickety, 18-foot-high “spirit platform” atop a finger of rock overlooking a sheer drop like the one Wile E. Coyote plummets down. Tethered by a digitally erased harness, that is actually star Armie Hammer (“The Social Network”) and not a stuntman — though, as Hammer concedes, “The actual stone was wider. It was more of a butte,” he says. “So the crew and all that could fit up there.” Specifies Verbinski, “We painted out the right side” in postproduction.

Which doesn’t mean being perched on the edge wasn’t still harrowing. “Astronaut diapers,” Hammer says, possibly joking.

He and other actors, in fact, did several stunts themselves, including riding atop moving trains. In one scene, a chained-together Hammer and Johnny Depp, who plays Tonto, are plucked off by an overhead hook and swung around a pole. “That was awful,” Depp remembers in a statement provided by Disney. “It looked like a carnival ride and, in a way, it could have been fun ... but you have these metal shackles on your wrist that by the time they really start swinging that thing, it sucked you to the outside of it, like a centrifuge, so that chain just starts binding on your wrist.”

“Armie, he’s young, he’s enthusiastic,” Verbinski recalls of asking them to do such stunts. “Johnny will look at me and go, ‘Really?’” Yet the 50-year-old Depp and even 56-year-old William Fichtner, who plays Cavendish, went along.

“Jumping out of the moving train onto the horse, I actually did that,” Fichtner says proudly. “Now, there are many moments in the movie where Pete Turner, my stunt guy, made me look really good. But I’ll tell you, that stuff at the end” — call it a railroad-car cataclysm — “is the most terrifying stuff I’ve ever shot.”

Hammer, as well, remembers anxiety of a different sort: meeting Depp, one of the world’s biggest stars, for the first time, at a New Mexico office building during pro-

duction meetings.

“He had just come from a camera test so he was in full hair and makeup, and I had just come from a day of cowboy boot camp,” Hammer says. “I meet Johnny and I see 18 years of my growing up watching his movies and remembering his face — and he has zero of that in reciproca-tion!” He laughs. “So it’s, like, ‘I feel I know you so well and I’m creeping you out because you have no idea who I am!’ But ultimately you realize you’re both just people here to do a job. And he was so great about it, just so easy

going and relaxed. He didn’t carry himself like a movie star. It always just felt like dealing with a normal guy, which was great.”

Likewise, this movie’s Lone Ranger, more so than in other incarnations, is not only an iconic figure but a regular human being. To paraphrase the famous line, who is that masked man? Here, he’s more man than a mask. And after decades, that may be the new face of an old legend.

LONE RANGER TIMELINE

JAN. 31, 1933: “The Lone Ranger” — created by a group

under radio station co-owner George W. Trendle, with key contributions by Harold True, writer Fran Striker and director James Jewell — debuts on Detroit’s WXYZ and seven other Michigan radio stations. A number of voice actors play the lead roles over the years.

JANUARY 1934: WXYZ helps launch the new Mutual Broadcasting System radio network, including WOR in New York, with “The Lone Ranger” as its anchor program. The series switches to NBC’s Blue Network, which becomes ABC, on May 2, 1942, and airs through May 25, 1956.

1938: “The Lone Ranger,” the first of two Republic Pictures movie serials, stars Lee Powell as the hero and Victor Daniels, aka Chief Thundercloud, as Tonto. A

feature film edited from the 15 weekly chapters was released in 1940. Robert Livingston succeeds Powell in the 1939 sequel “The Lone Ranger Rides Again.”

SEPT. 15, 1949-SEPT. 12, 1957: ABC’s iconic TV show “The Lone Ranger” stars Clayton Moore (except for at least 26 episodes filmed from 1951 to 1953, starring John Hart) and Jay Silverheels as Tonto.

1956: The Warner Bros. feature film “The Lone Ranger” stars the series’ cast, as does United Artists’ “The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold” in 1958.

SEPT. 10, 1966-SEPT. 6, 1969: “The Lone Ranger,” the first of two animated series, airs Saturday mornings on CBS. A new series aired Sept. 13, 1980-Sept. 11, 1982 as part of CBS’ “The Tarzan

/ Lone Ranger Adventure Hour” and subsequent “The Tarzan / Lone Ranger / Zorro Adventure Hour.”

1981: Universal Pictures’ “The Legend of the Lone Ranger,” starring Clint Eastwood (vocally dubbed by James Keach) in his only role, with Michael Horse as Tonto and Christopher Lloyd as Butch Cavendish, proves a high-profile failure.

FEB. 26, 2003: Chad Michael Murray and Nathaniel Arcand starred in the ill-conceived WB TV movie “The Lone Ranger.”

2013: The premiere of Walt Disney Pictures’ “The Lone Ranger” starring Armie Hammer and Johnny Depp.

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