

Major Dundee



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Major Dundee. Produced by Jerry Bresler. Directed by Sam Peckinpah. Screenplay by Harvey Julian Fink, Sam Peckinpah and Oscar Saul. Developed from a story by Fink. Photography by Sam Leavitt. Production Design by Alfred Ybarra. Editing by William Lyon, Dan Starling and Howard Kunin. Music by Christopher Calliando. (2005 version) A Columbia Pictures Production. Original Release: March 1965. Restored DVD version released 2005. No rating. Length: the restored DVD version is 130 minutes without a commentary; 113 minutes for the original U.S. theatrical release. 126 minutes or more in some locales. A 278 minute unreleased version was made. The unfound director's cut is 152/156 minutes. This DVD version also contains an optional commentary with experts on Peckinpah's work, a short documentary about the stunts and a 20 minute excerpt from Mike Siegel's *Passion and Poetry -The Ballad of Sam Peckinpah*. This excerpt deals with the making of the film. It contains filming footage and later interviews with some surviving cast members: ***** 85%

Cast

The Cast

Major Amos Dundee: Charlton Heston

Captain Ben Tyreen: Richard Harris

Scout Samuel Potts: James Coburn

Bugler Tim Ryan: Michael Anderson Junior

Teresa Santiago: Santa Berger

Lieutenant Grahame: Jim Hutton

Reverend Dahlstrom: R.G. Armstrong

Sierra Charriba: Michael Pate

Sergeant Chillum: Ben Johnson

Private O.W. Hadley: Warren Oates

Private Arthur Hadley: L.Q. Jones

Private Jimmy Lee: John Davis Chandler

Sergeant Gomez: Mario Adorf

Private Aesop: Brock Peters

Wiley the muleteer: Slim Pickens

Priam the horse thief: Dub Taylor

Riago the Apache scout: José Carlos Ruiz

The French Colonel: Albert Carrier

Captain Frank Waller: Karl Swenson

The Doctor in Durango: Enrique Lucero

The singer in Durango: Aurora Clavel

Linda the lover of Bugler Ryan: Begoña Palacios



All images are taken from the public domain with permission. This review is an excerpt from my forthcoming e-book *Major Dundee: Fifty Years on*. This tells the story of the film in text and pictures and the story behind the film

Review: the 2005 version

Major Dundee is an odd film in that it can be viewed satisfactorily in two opposing ways. For those who do not wish to examine the subtext or be overly discerning, it

can be viewed as in the genre of a good adventure yarn. They will be happy with the shorter versions. For the perceptive it rewards with subtleties that can easily be concealed by its violence or eradicated by its over-editing. For those tired of formula westerns it can offer a different viewpoint, one going a long way ahead of Hollywood's clichés to question accepted values and ideas of an orderly world where heroes represent goodness and goodness wins.



The film is narrated from a wartime diary which literally dissolves onscreen

Major Dundee is a great western, a landmark film which was part of the new depiction of the West which emerged with John Ford's *The Searchers*. (1956) However it would be well into the 1960s before more than a few other films followed Ford's lead – and Ford made several of them. Unlike so many films before it, *Major Dundee* had no rose tinted views of the American West, no didactic lessons, or formulaic plot devices and no cardboard code heroes or any other mythic archetypes enacting their set roles. The west is no paradise waiting to be made a part of American civilisation. Instead existence there is a gritty, dreary, prolonged Hobbesian struggle to survive, with only occasional moments of relaxation, joy and laughter.

From the film's first scene this gritty uncompromising realism becomes apparent. The killing of children was almost taboo in American cinema, but here Ryan narrates the killing of the girls and see a girl's bloodied corpse, shot with arrows, a family has been murdered and a company of Union cavalry massacred by Sierra Charriba's marauding Apache war band.

Major Dundee, a Texan loyal to the Union, initially appears as that familiar figure in American culture that deals with any type of warfare: the fearless maverick who knows better than his orthodox superiors. But does he? The film gains much of its

strength by undercutting Hollywood clichés and having a subtle ambivalence in its presentation: this film can be absorbed as another western pursuit movie with another tough, brave, always right western hero – but look carefully and that image disintegrates.



Dundee in a pose that states his character

Dundee has been sent to New Mexico to run a prison camp for captured Confederates because he was supposedly fighting his own war at Gettysburg. During the Civil War such transfers were a form of removing unsatisfactory officers. They were removed from the war in the east to the western theatre, which

both sides saw as of lesser importance than the east. Officers frequently considered such punishments degrading and punishing. Major Dundee has an ambivalent attitude to army regulations: superficially he seems a stickler for correct procedure, forms of address and obedience – to his will. In reality, (as his second in command Captain Waller warns him) the expedition Dundee plans so as to regain the white boys kidnapped by Sierra Charriba is illegal. This is because he will abandon his post so as to go into Mexico to kill or capture the marauding Apaches. Dundee could even be tried and shot for it. As Peckinpah wisely realised, this point needed more development in the story, for Mexico at this time was under French control, relations with the Lincoln administration were hostile to the point of war nearly breaking out and in this tense situation American troops fighting the French could lead to an unwanted war – which would lead at the least, to the ruin of Dundee's career and possibly to his shooting for desertion. Peckinpah wanted to include this complication but the studio said no.

These factors, the difficult position of Southern loyalists, the reasons officers were sent west and the French problem in Mexico would be known only to history students and Civil War buffs. *They* would gain an enriched understanding of the film's complexities, but what of the rest of the audience? With a little more explanatory dialogue woven into scenes these points could have been made – and probably were by Peckinpah, but were cut by somebody above him.



The burial of the first casualties



Richard Harris as Ben Tyreen, a Confederate captain

Dundee puts together a force of around fifty men, these consisting of six Union blacks willing to fight, ten other Union volunteers, three scouts, assorted civilians and twenty Confederates, five of whom are escaping hanging by volunteering for the expedition. One of these five is Captain Ben Tyreen, who leads the Confederates. He is a man who has something about him that is not quite grown up, being a rebel in more than the sense of being a Confederate. An Irish immigrant, he seems to have a mind filled with romantic ideas of cavaliers and knights as he makes speeches about his loyalties, his oath of honour, and as he damns Dundee for his practicalities and talks about the duel that got him cashiered on Dundee's vote. He even looks like a cavalier as he prances his horse about, ramrod straight with his plumed slouch hat and his braided uniform and sabre. A more different man to flinty, realistic, cold Dundee would be hard to find. Each embodies characteristics of their cause: each sees the other as a traitor and a fake. Tyreen sees Dundee as a traitor to the south and a bad officer: Dundee sees Tyreen not only as a traitor for being a Confederate, but as a poser going through life by

going through phases and dreams. He started as an Irish immigrant, failed as an officer and now acts the Confederate cavalier with dreams of a white colonnaded mansion that apparently will never happen, as Dundee scornfully tells him. Tyreen responds frequently with equally savage accuracy.

As the expedition goes further into Mexico it becomes obvious that rescuing the children serves only an excuse, particularly after they have been found and are then returned, with Dundee paying little attention to them. Oddly the boys seem to like being Apaches as they play with their bows and arrows. This point, subtly made, in the background while Dundee plans their return, remains undeveloped.

Dundee insists on still going after the Apaches, getting into more trouble, losing more casualties and causing more conflicts within his command. He emerges as a misanthrope without compassion or decency. When he angrily tells a tearful Bugler Ryan to stop playing taps for the burial of the massacred dead this seems so and it becomes obvious again when he disrupts another funeral by mechanically shovelling dirt onto the dead, while the others are still singing a hymn while gathered around the gravesite. The news of the villagers who helped them being massacred due to his actions has no effect on him. At the film's end, when he rides away from most of his command being killed minutes before, he shows no emotion, but asks Ryan to play him a tune. He is Iron John indeed, but iron does not bend, it breaks.

He does break, for a time. Sexual involvement with Teresa, perhaps the fate of the villagers, the execution of a begging deserter Hadley, and his wounding which reminds him he is physically vulnerable, all combine to form a pressure he cannot withstand. Dundee turns out to be a closet alcoholic, which he sarcastically states "is the secret of my success." This may well be the real reason he was sent west; Wisely Peckinpah leaves the suggestion hanging in the air. Despite his courage his actions show him to be as much a villain as a hero. Tyreen is right: he is not a particularly good officer or the great moralist he superficially seems to be. Although he is a prison warden, he gets Priam to steal horses for the expedition and has Lieutenant Grahame steal supplies and a cannon from other Union forces. He makes several mistakes, which Tyreen accurately lambasts him with. He concludes one of his several contemptuous tirades with a calm but castrating question, "How exactly do you see yourself major? Have you ever wondered why they made you a jailer instead of a soldier?"

Ironically Tyreen's contemptuous comment that he is not even worth killing works on Dundee, getting him back into his iron persona. Dundee tacitly admits his inabilities in one of his first scenes when he says to his lieutenant of scouts, Samuel Potts that "I'm a long way from Gettysburg" and then asks him for his advice on the situation. He frequently asks Potts for advice and gets some that while unsolicited appears needed. Potts is usually right and Dundee is usually wrong.

Against advice Dundee trusts the old Apache who leads them into an ambush where fourteen of his men die and the expedition's supplies are destroyed. He has other wounded who need medical help, they all need food and his horses need to rest. This leads Dundee decides to attack a Mexican village garrisoned by the French to get the supplies, rest and medical aid they need. Against their protests that they are neutrals and ignores warnings that his acts will have repercussions, he bombards them. This makes enemies of the French. After seizing the village and taking the surrender of the little French garrison he does nothing to protect the villagers, who side with him and even treat him as a deliverer and their hero. Wounds are tended to and romances bloom. Ryan meets Linda, a nurse on the operating table. Implicitly they become lovers, walking hand in hand to a nearby house, but this is a 1965 film and this Lubitsch touch does not develop into anything explicit. Another gap in logic appears here. Ryan has been wounded in the arse, badly enough to get medical treatment in the village, so how can he ride a horse for days so as to reach the village? He does not narrate about being wounded either.

The villagers and Dundee's command organise a fiesta. Ryan narrates that although they have come to take supplies they are sharing them. The mood is joyous – for everybody but Dundee. He swigs from a bottle while looking at the celebration with a cold, almost hostile stare and alienated body language. When Ryan and Linda approach and Ryan tells him that sitting alone is bad for the soul that he should join them, he has it half right. Dundee confers with Tyreen when he approaches him to show off his newly plundered coat. Dundee starts explaining to Tyreen what he intends. He wants every one of his men to be "drunk as a fiddler's bitch tonight" so that the French can escape. He thinks these escapees will rush to the larger force and will try to recapture the village, but Dundee's force will ambush them as they rush to the village and so will get their supplies. Although Dundee (and for that matter Peckinpah) does not spell it out the villagers are unknowing bait. Dundee does not elaborate on any plan to protect them, train them

or even warn them. In a pause of a few seconds when Dundee explains the bare bones of the plan Tyreen seems to recognise what Dundee's plan implies, but then he nervously if enthusiastically laughs in an artificial way and acclaims Dundee as either a seventy dollar genuine military genius or the biggest military fool alive.



James Coburn as Samuel Potts the scout



Santa Berger as Teresa

After this Dundee starts romancing Teresa, one of the villagers he will betray. Once again this point is not pushed, viewers must be perceptive to grasp much in this film. The ambush of the approaching French occurs just as Dundee planned,

but they are a much larger force than his and he cannot wipe them out. They go on to attack the village, but this only becomes known to the audience because Ryan narrates it and Dundee mentions it in passing as being common knowledge in the camp. Peckinpah does not develop in any obvious way what the use of the villagers implies about Dundee. It actually implies more about the military world and the nature of war, for protecting civilians is always a problem for soldiers and refugees are an encumbrance for soldiers on a mission, unless protecting or moving these people are their specific task. Unlike many earlier Hollywood films from the studio system, Peckinpah did not make ham-fisted points, he apparently expected his audience to pick up on implications and subtleties.

Dundee has been described as another Captain Ahab, an obsessive, a megalomaniac and a glory hunter, but what he is is an officer who is very task oriented. Officers are not known for lacking in ambition and avoiding glory for themselves, getting off task or tolerating failure. To lack ambition, ruthlessness and a hunger for victory leads to more misery than having these characteristics. War makes men callous and sometimes it makes them into monsters.

In his romance with Teresa he seems to present a more human side, but much about her behaviour is not credible. She follows the soldiers after the village has been massacred and unless she is dim-witted, she must have at least a suspicion of what Dundee did. She witnesses him arrange the execution of O.W. Hadley and sees him shot, and yet when at most a few hours later, she finds him by the river bank, she says she understands it was necessary. They become lovers. Executions are usually not an aphrodisiac.

She asks him what most of the audience must be asking of this movie by now. Why do men have to fight? For someone for whom war is life he finds this puzzling and musing inadequately, concludes that it is probably because it is easy and an easy way to settle things.

A different answer comes seconds later when an Apache arrow hits his calf.



Love gone wrong

Superficially the wound comes because he wanders outside his picket lines with Teresa. Actually this is a blatant example of Hollywood's subtext formula: pain follows sex and afterwards punishment/castration is on the way. Peckinpah rightly challenged so much of the Hollywood formulas and confections in scripts, but the puritanical sex-death motif was not really challenged. In displaying nudity he went as far as he could in 1965 with Santa Berger and Heston swimming nude at this scene by the pool, but he could not present sensuality without penalty. When the arrow wound means that Dundee has to be taken to a doctor, he takes up with another woman. Luckily when Teresa finds out that she does not betray him, instead she warns him about the suspicious French nearby. When she leaves he starts to be human and starts punishing himself with alcohol. Soon he ends up lying drunk in a gutter being licked at by dogs, hardly a sight that inspires loyalty. Tyreen's abuse sobers him up and he returns to being the iron major, still making mistakes. The subtext point here is that as long as there are men like Sierra Charibba there must be Dundees to stop them. By giving in to pain, doubt and his weakness for alcohol the mission starts failing: to succeed he must be the major who commands.

As the narrator states, they have forgotten the French, but the French have not forgotten them, a fact that leads Dundee's command into his last disastrous battle.

Despite his errors Dundee gets much right, including his major focus, his intention to destroy Sierra Charriba and his war band. Tyreen's comment to his face that Dundee is either a genuine military genius or the biggest military fool possible sounds like flattery mixed with bombast, but turns out to be accurate.

Peckinpah wisely shows the viewer all this rather tell us. We have to work it out and much does not appear as obvious in a first watching. The narration works as a framework, given from the viewpoint a young bugler writing in a diary would give. Sometimes a bit more information from him would have helped. Peckinpah does present sharply delineated, well-rounded characters, but more narrative development in the supporting cast's roles would have been welcome. The early scenes where characters are introduced does more than suggest that *Major Dundee* will be an ensemble piece; this begins an ensemble piece. Then that adumbration does not develop; the cast of supporting characters (many of them among the best in Hollywood film history) are in roles that have great potential, but they are regulated to supporting roles - in the worst sense of the term. They exist not so much as characters in themselves or in relation to each other, but to further the plot along or to aid the hero. Few other westerns have anywhere near such a fine cast, *Fort Apache*, *High Noon*, *The Big Country*, *How the West Was Won*, *The Wild Bunch* all come to mind, but Peckinpah - or Breslin lost a chance to develop the potential of a dream cast into something beyond the beginnings of a great ensemble piece. Instead viewers have fragments, which remain undeveloped and therefore unexplained. This makes them become puzzling illogicalities if the film is watched perceptively.

Tyreen's actions in his last scenes are one salient example. He becomes illogical and almost implausible. Minutes after being about to kill Dundee he enthusiastically fights beside him and gives him the Union flag, which he said he hated. His smile after getting a mortal wound and then charging to his death only makes sense if his hero-cavalier role has devoured his sense of reality. On the other hand his smile might be Harris going out of role and the difficulty of the scene and pressing time meant a reshoot was impossible. Saving Heston from drowning under a rolled horse probably had priority.

Problems with continuity, logic, implausibilities and contradictions in the script are legion. Other aspects were better in the shorter version. The return of the deserter O.W. Hadley at the pool had the bubbling joyous sound of the waterfall ironically in the background. When wounded Dundee enjoys being sung to by the

Mexican woman in Durango, her voice tones, playing and facial expression show that she is really serenading him and looking forward to sexual involvement. Without those few seconds the extended version scene in Durango look different, as if she is a compliant sex object. For once the editing makes Dundee seem worse than he is.



Saving the flag

Even the restored version has other faults. Peckinpah sets the Confederate's escape, the Christmas Eve battle and the final battle with Sierra Charriba at night, and they are very black nights. After three viewings this reviewer is still unsure about what happens in some of those night scenes. Going by Heston's comments and one of the stills the Christmas Eve battle seems to have been filmed in daylight and should have been shown that way, but Peckinpah remade day into night as Heston stated. Artificial moonlight would have helped in the other two scenes which by what the plot requires, have to be at night.

Other omissions and reductions from the earlier version include the death scenes of Jimmy Lee and Reverend Dahlstrom, which were longer and clearer. The last scene where the survivors gather was also longer and had a very different meaning. It showed wounded Union extras, two more Confederates bringing up the rear of the cavalcade as they leave the river and the wounded, weary, gathered survivors in medium shots. Potts clearly had taken a bad chest wound. For perhaps a minute the survivors stare at each other pensively before Dundee leads them on. This scene reinforces the cost and the misery of their journey. The scene ended with Bugler Ryan narrating that they were riding into an uncertain future. This goes against the

clichéd ending where the hero rides off after restoring order and gaining a bride. After she abandons him Dundee Teresa holds him in contempt. He rides away into a world of chaos and one where he is likely to find disgrace and punishment for his actions. These aspects were kept in the shorter version and should have been left in the extended versions.



Peckinpah's films often have a strongly lyrical quality

Clearly the extended version of 2005 is not the restored masterpiece some claim for it. Even so, *Major Dundee* in its extended DVD version appears as a massive improvement, gaining in clarity, depth, plausibility and appropriate music. The film has many virtues, being rightly praised for the fine acting by the ensemble cast, the beauty of the settings which are so finely photographed, the attention to detail, subtle moments, challenges to Hollywood formula plots and characters and the uncompromising sense of reality.

Major Dundee survives rewatching. It survives fifty years, which works as one way to separate the great from the mediocre. It even survives what its own studio did to it.

Thank the conscientious for the DVD restoration, imperfect as it appears. Now please give us the director's cut. Even better would be finding the lost version.

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Sam Peckinpah 1925-1984