

Lights, camera, action

Walter Hill directs *Dead for a Dollar*

By Johnny D. Boggs

With dusk fast approaching, Walter Hill stays busy, filming the day's last scene on the frontier town set at San Cristobal Ranch near Lamy, New Mexico.

He's inside a building crowded with lights, cameras, microphones, actors, crew members, producers and one reporter. From the outside, the structure could pass for a hotel or fancy saloon in the Rocky Mountain West. Inside, at least for today, one corner has been transformed into a doctor/coroner's office in Mexico.

"I like what you're doing," Hill tells a camera operator, "but it's too artsy. Keep it simple." When the cameraman, sitting on a staircase, zooms in on actress Rachel Brosnahan, framed ever so slightly by balusters, Hill says, "That's perfect. Leave it there."

A few minutes later, Hill calls an end to this September workday. It's Christoph Waltz's last day filming, and as the two-time Academy Award winner signs autographs and poses for selfies with cast and crew, Hill huddles with cinematographer Lloyd Ahern II and then others, planning for tomorrow.

Hill's a few months shy of his 80th birthday on this autumn afternoon in 2021, uses a cane sometimes to get around and finds himself often catching his breath on this production – at an elevation higher than 6,000 feet, he's not alone. But this is what the two-time Emmy Award-winning director and WWA patron member loves to do.

"He's the consummate professional, and he's got the biggest sense of humor," says producer Carolyn McMaster of Calgary, Alberta-based Chaos A Film Company. "It's dry wit, I love it, and he's a great guy."

McMaster's producing partner is Neil Dunn. "We're the boots on the ground," she says. Quiver Distribution is handling domestic distribution for North America with Jeff



Walter Hill on the set of *Dead for a Dollar*. Lewis Jacobs

Sackman as executive producer and Berry Meyerowitz, producer, both from Quiver. Myriad Pictures is the international distributor.

Dead for a Dollar is McMaster's first Western feature film. But Hill is a veteran of the genre, even though he started in the business when Westerns were dying off at theaters and on television.

"The first thing I ever worked on was a Western," Hill recalls. "I was a production assistant on [CBS-TV's] *Gunsmoke*. Lloyd Ahern was a camera assistant on *Gunsmoke*. Lloyd and I have been friends for – oh, hell, it was 1966 – best part of 50 years. I always liked Westerns."

Hill's feature-film credits as a director include *The Long Riders* (1980), *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993) and *Wild Bill* (1995), the latter which he cowrote.

He's not just about Westerns. Known for his action films, Hill scripted *The Getaway* (1972), director Sam Peckinpah's edgy drama starring Steve McQueen. Hill's directorial debut, which he also co-wrote, was *Hard Times* (1975), a Depression Era drama starring Charles Bronson and James Coburn. He produced the *Alien* franchise and directed and cowrote *48 Hrs.* (1982), the freewheeling cops-and-robbers adventure starring Nick Nolte and Eddie Murphy.

But Hill's Emmy Awards came for directing a 2004 episode of HBO's *Deadwood* and the 2006 two-part miniseries *Broken Trail*, which won screenwriter Alan Geoffrion a Spur Award. You might even hear arguments that Hill's *Extreme Prejudice* (1987) and *Last Man Standing* (1996) are contemporary Westerns.

Dead for a Dollar isn't the only Western movie in the news on this September afternoon. *The Power of the Dog*, based on Thomas Savage's 1967 novel, is playing at the Venice Film Festival. *Cry Macho*, starring Clint Eastwood, is being released. *The Harder They Fall* is on its way to Netflix. Actor

Rachel Brosnahan and Christoph Waltz in a scene from *Dead for a Dollar*. Lewis Jacobs

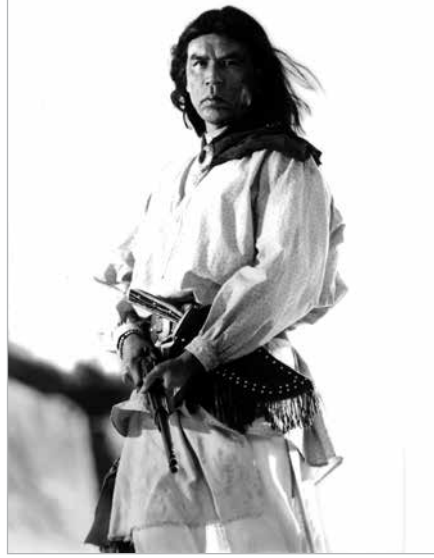


Left to right: Warren Burke, Rachel Brosnahan and Christoph Waltz in *Dead for a Dollar*. Lewis Jacobs





Walter Hill directing *Extreme Prejudice* (1987).
Sam Emerson



Wes Studi, who emceed the 2012 *Spur Awards* banquet, had the title role in Walter Hill's *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993).

Nicholas Cage has announced plans to star in two Westerns, *The Old Way* and *Butcher's Crossing*.

Is this a new Western renaissance? "Well, this is probably my fifth renaissance of the Western that I've lived through," Hill says. "We'll see, but I don't think so. I'd love to tell you I did. But the thing that was the quintessential aspect of the Westerns' popularity in the old days, and why it was such a popular genre in my parents' and grandparents' time, was they were very close to their agrarian roots.

"And now, I don't think people have that feeling at all, and so the underpinning of the Western experience, what they used to call the winning of the West, the wild, wide open plains, doesn't resonate like it used to.

"Still, if you've got a good story, and it's well told, you'll find an audience. There's a universal need for stories."

Is it easier for Hill to direct a film he has written?

"I suppose it is," he says. "I never really thought about it. You just go out there and tell them what you want them to do. I think you certainly have a different relationship with the material. One of the biggest differences is the cast – I don't want to use the word *intimidating* – but they're more, shall we say, respectful of the script and probably hold their own ideas back a little more when the director's written the script.

"But," he adds with a grin, "not entirely."

Hill's screenwriting style is all about revision. Call him the anti-John Milius,

who wrote the original screenplay for *Geronimo: An American Legend*.

"I've known John for a while – we're about the same age and got going about the same time," Hill says. "John's a great, great writer. Of my generation of the screenwriters coming out of the '70s, John's scripts [*Jeremiah Johnson*, *Apocalypse Now*] were the most readable, [Paul] Schrader's [*Taxi Driver*, *Hardcore*] were the most intellectual – and I mean that in a positive way – and mine had the best tough-guy dialogue. With John, how do I put this? I say this out of love for the guy, love and respect. He writes a script, and that's it. You're not going to get a lot of changes."

Hill has a different approach.

"I rewrite a lot," he says. "Change things on the set. I know the actors better, I know the story better. I crystalize some of my thoughts. Others become murkier, and sometimes the murkier turns out better."

Deadline, a Hollywood internet magazine, announced *Dead for a Dollar* shortly before production began, describing the plot as: "The story will follow Max Borlund (Waltz), a famed bounty hunter, hired to find and return Rachel Price, the politically progressive wife of Nathan Price, a successful Santa Fe businessman. Max is told she has been kidnapped by an African American army deserter, Elijah Jones, and is being held for ransom in Mexico. When Max goes south of the border he soon runs across his sworn enemy, expatriate American Joe Cribbens ([Willem] Dafoe), a professional gambler, sometime

outlaw, who Max had tracked down and sent to prison years before."

Which Hill calls "a slight proxy of the plot."

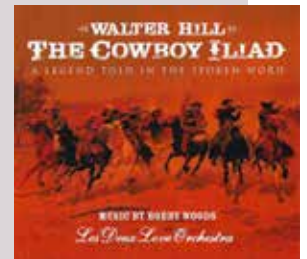
Then he adds: "People wrote in and said, 'That's the same plot as *The Professionals* [producer-director-writer Richard Brooks's 1966 hit Western starring Burt Lancaster and Lee Marvin].' And I said, 'It's the same [expletive] plot as Homer and *The Iliad*. If you want to look for antecedents, there it is. We have to go chasing after a runaway woman.'"

Hill slides into his car, and is driven off into a glorious New Mexico sunset, but not likely a figurative one. McMaster says she'd do another Western "in a heartbeat."

"And I'd do another with Walter," she
WALTER HILL (continued on page 11)

Walter Hill's *Cowboy Iliad*

Walter Hill is famous as a screenwriter, director and producer. But he's also a voice actor and Western folklorist/historian.



In 2019, Hill wrote and recorded *The Cowboy Iliad: A Legend Told in the Spoken Word*, a CD with background music written by Bobby Woods and performed by Les Deux Love Orchestra. Marmont Lane Books published the audio CD and a companion book, which focus on the legend of an 1871 saloon gunfight that helped give Newton, Kansas, the nickname "Bloody Newton."

"I wanted to hire an actor," Hill said of the CD. "I still think we probably should have hired an actor. But I liked it. I thought it was an interesting piece.

"And ... what happened in Newton [is] so much richer in a lot of ways and ... a much bigger gun battle than the O.K. Corral."

– JDB



Award-winning film director, producer and screenwriter Walter Hill. Nicolas Auproux

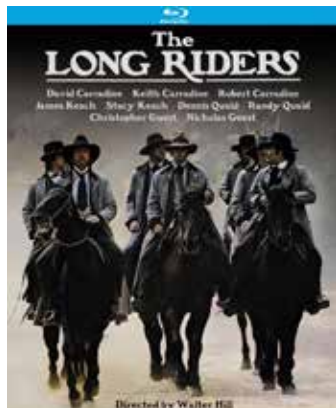
Walter Hill speaks his mind on ...

By Johnny D. Boggs

Director, screenwriter and WWA patron member Walter Hill is not shy when it comes to telling stories or sharing his opinions.

Here are his thoughts on some movies and Hollywood legends:

David Carradine, who played Cole Younger in Hill's *The Long Riders* (1980)



“David Carradine was wonderful. They were all good, but David One of the cast said afterward [Carradine] stole the movie. [Carradine] said, ‘No, I took it fair and square.’ David was very funny.”

John Ford, director of *The Searchers* (1956):

“[Director] Budd Boetticher told me he was going to Warner Bros. to see

[John] Wayne’s production company. Wayne said, ‘Go over to Stage 11, Pappy’s making a movie there.’ Boetticher had known Ford a long time and they were pretty good friends. He goes on the set. It’s deathly quiet. ... Ford’s chewing on his handkerchief in his chair. Boetticher goes over and says, ‘Hey, Jack how are you?’ Ford stares at him. Boetticher thinks he hasn’t seen him in years, says, ‘Budd. Budd Boetticher. Just wanted to say hello.’ Ford just stares. Budd leaves the stage and says, ‘I’ve been friends with this guy for 15 years. I haven’t done anything wrong to him. What the [expletive] is this about? I’m gonna wait a couple hours.’ ... Ford comes out, sees Boetticher and says, ‘Hey Budd, how are you?’ Boetticher says, ‘I’m fine, Jack, but I thought there was some problem because you were so unfriendly.’ Ford says, ‘I just didn’t want the actors to know I had any friends.’

“Seems to me that tells you everything you need to know about John Ford.”

Howard Hawks, director of *Red River* (1948)

“He didn’t think his films were successful unless they were hits. He thought there was something wrong with the movie. ... They were made for an audience and if they didn’t find an audience there was probably something wrong with the product. And that was his approach. In a way it seems a very Philistine approach, and it was certainly a very studio approach, but at the same time he was definitely not a studio director. He was very independent, but at the same time he thought a lot like the studios. He just didn’t want anyone to be his boss.”

***Shane* (1953), a hit Western film based on a novel by Jack Schaefer**

“When I was 11 or 12 years old, I thought *Shane* was about the best movie I’d ever seen. I still think it’s wonderful. What makes its simplicity wonderful is that it’s basically seen through a child’s eyes. It took me a long time to understand that’s what made it so good. It’s a strong, simple, moral Western, which quite often the best Westerns are. Nobody likes to say they’re a moralist, but Westerns really are about the conduct of life, values, codes of honor, codes of faith.”

Raoul Walsh, director of *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941)

“Raoul Walsh set an aesthetic standard I’ve never been able to live up to. It seems to be the most pragmatic of the cinematic style: Every shot advances the narrative.”

***Red River* (1948)**

“I cannot resist it. ... It has a lot of flaws. There’s no question about that. ... Did Hawks screw up his own film with the ending? That he didn’t have the courage to make it really Greek? That he went for Hollywood values? Or was he – which he was – true to Hawksian principles? Probably, he gave the audience the ending they wanted. It’s a fabulous debate.”

Best director

“I don’t think anyone was ever better than [Akira] Kurosawa [director of *Seven Samurai* (1954)]. He was more consistent in making films of the highest artistic value. His technical approach was flawless.”

WALTER HILL (from page 10)

adds. “People should be able to keep making films as long as they want, and I commend Walter for still ... trucking. When you’re that good, why not have the world see what you’re still able to do?”

As Hill said earlier: “I will say this: For a guy my age, it’s fun to be working.”

Dead for a Dollar was scheduled for a September 30 release in the United States and Canada after a world premiere at the 2022 Venice (Italy) Film Festival in September.