

## A Nostalgic Roundup Along Happy

Trails By Alessandra Stanley

A decade after Clint Eastwood's "Unforgiven" won four Oscars, westerns seem to be back in vogue. Kevin Costner's latest revival of the genre, "Open Range," which he directs and which he stars in along with Robert Duvall and Annette Bening, is to open on Aug. 15. On the same day Film Forum plans to show a new print of "Johnny Guitar," a cult 1954 western. Next year HBO plans to show "Deadwood," a western written by David Milch, who created "N.Y.P.D. Blue" with Steven Bochco. Even Dick Wolf, the creator of "Law & Order," says he has long dreamed of transferring his franchise to sheriffs' offices and desert trails.

And tonight the pilot episode of "Peacemakers" makes its debut on the USA Network. That series stars Tom Berenger as a gruff, Civil War-scarred marshal who in the late 1880's is forced to team up with a stuffy fingerprinting expert from the Pinkerton Detective Agency (Peter O'Meara).

Because the show pits Mr. Berenger's gun-and-gut instincts against his partner's fussy fascination with the new science of forensics, some viewers may dismiss it as a bizarre attempt to retrofit the popularity of "C.S.I." to the Western frontier. But "Peacemakers" is really a cozy, old-fashioned detective show in the vein of "Columbo" or "Murder, She Wrote," set amid the dirt streets and swinging saloon doors of "Bonanza" or "Gunsmoke."

It is clever at times, and quite charming. It is even somewhat plausible: fingerprinting in the late 1880's was on the brink of revolutionizing police work. (Mark Twain's lawyer hero, Pudd'nhead Wilson, was so named partly because he was considered a fool for studying "finger marks.") But the startling thing about "Peacemakers" is that it makes no effort to appeal to younger viewers.

There is no brawny, bare-chested hunk. The women on the show, though they have HBO careers (an undertaker and a chain-smoking newspaper columnist), are handsome, not gorgeous or adolescent. The violence is muted, and the action hopelessly quaint — the marshal jumps from a high cliff onto a moving train in the ravine below.

After a few ghastly experiments at youth-oriented westerns -- there was last year's shortlived "Firefly," a cowboys-in-space drama on Fox -- television executives seem to have given up. This fall there will be more than 20 crime shows just on the three main networks and Fox. It is television Darwinism: as Mr. Eastwood's High Plains Drifter became Dirty Harry, cop shows subsumed the western.

When John F. Kennedy was elected in 1960, there were only three networks and more than 20 westerns; the three top-rated shows in the country were "Gunsmoke," "Wagon Train" and "Have Gun, Will Travel." By the time Ronald Reagan loped into the White House in 1981, the choice of westerns had dwindled to "Little House on the Prairie," a family drama that made Mr. Reagan tear up as he watched it while eating dinner on a TV tray in the family residence.

There are occasional breakthroughs. "Lonesome Dove" was a hit as a mini-series in 1989. In January TNT did well with "Monte Walsh," a western starring Tom Selleck. But mostly reruns of "Bonanza," "Gunsmoke" and "The Gene Autry Show" are confined to their own nostalgia ghettos on premium cable networks like the Hallmark Channel or the Western Channel.

It is tempting to conclude that the western is a manly genre ill suited to a feminized culture in which women not only decide what is watched in the home but increasingly choose what is picked up by the networks.

Television westerns were always different from movie westerns, however. If the great films of John Ford and Howard Hawks were epic tales of man's lonely struggle to tame the land (or drive the indigenous occupants off of it), the television western, by its very nature, was reductive and domesticating. It was as impossible to capture the painterly sweep and solitude of Monument Valley on a black-and-white television set as it was to convey the poignancy of the outsider riding off into the sunset on a show in which Shane really does come back every week.

Eventually, "Bonanza" and even "Gunsmoke" became a bit frilly and bourgeois - family, money and romance became more central to television westerns than the clash between cowboys and Indians or farmers and ranchers. ("The Big Valley," starring Barbara Stanwyck as the family matriarch in black leather gloves and chaps, was just a film noir version of "Bonanza"

class tension and the frisson of incest.)

The last truly successful television western was "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman," and not coincidentally it was almost entirely a woman's fantasy --- a postfeminist parable in which a beautiful Bostonian has a medical career on the 19th-century frontier, adopts a family of adorable orphans and also has a sultry sex life with a noble savage in a loincloth (actually a gorgeous, tanned white man raised by American Indians). The show ran from 1993 to 1998, and by the time it ended many women had found new, more contemporary forms of identification and escapism in shows like "Law & Order" and "Sex and the City." "Dr. Quinn" still has devoted fans, but CBS craved younger viewers, audiences who had no vestigial affection for cattle drives, saloon fights, stampedes, petticoats and cavalry charges.

"Peacemakers," like "Open Range," is not a sign that the western has a new relevance today. Instead, these efforts suggest that older television executives and filmmakers feel emboldened to make what they like. Especially on television, audiences are so splintered and their choices so varied that a network like USA can cater to older viewers and let Fox and WB battle for the 12-to-34-year-olds.

The New York  
Times July 30, 2003