

DVD review: The Electric Horseman

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The Electric Horseman (1979) Sydney Pollack

DVD, released by Odyssey, 17 October 2016, RRP £9.99, cert 15, running time 121 mins approx.

(Review by Diane A. Rodgers, Oct 2016)

A wonderfully understated comedy-drama, *The Electric Horseman* follows the story of Sonny Steele (Robert Redford), a five-time champion rodeo cowboy now turned brand spokesman for AMPco, a giant corporate firm selling 'Ranch' breakfast cereal. Steele's life has become essentially a series of advertising appearances, at which he is required to brandish a box of cereal with his face adorning it whilst wearing a garish cowboy outfit festooned with electric fairy lights. The forced smiles, autographs and constant touring are starting to crack Steele; when we meet him, he is a disillusioned, unreliable drunk, stumbling from one engagement to the next.

The film centres around a big Las Vegas convention where Steele is booked for a ride-on appearance with AMPco's prize mascot, a 12-million-dollar racehorse. Horse and rider are strapped up in purple paisley silk and electric lights, the ridiculous spectacle of which, in the capital of sensational fakery and money-worship, proves to be the final straw for Steele. Appalled that the horse (a past champion like himself) has been drugged in order to fulfil the appearance, Steele decides then and there to ride him off into the desert and away from the bright lights of Vegas and the public eye. It is here the film really begins, as investigative journalist Hallie Martin (Jane Fonda) picks up Sonny Steele's story and pursues his mission to restore the horse to freedom.

In tracking down and following Sonny, Hallie becomes impressed with his knowledge of animals, nature and the land; he is indeed no fake but a 'real' cowboy in the most nostalgic sense; looking back to an innocent, forgotten America. As Sonny and Hallie drop their guards, against astounding mountainous scenery they sing 'American the Beautiful', unashamed and without irony: "O beautiful for spacious skies/For amber waves of grain/For purple mountain majesties...". Nonetheless, there is little schmaltz to be found here; no overbearing passionate Hollywood drama; Fonda's character is reminded by Sonny that there is no need for pretension with him, "It's not gonna be on television".

Sonny's attempts to liberate the horse is also a way of trying to free himself; from the world of fame and commerce, from which he shuns further attention. The kinship Sonny feels for the horse spreads beyond the screen; his nursing of the animal in the film is detailed and attentive and in real life, Redford not only did all his own riding stunts but, apparently, loved the horse so much he brought it home and kept it for the rest of its life.

At its core, the story is really one of authenticity; the world of money and business, bright lights and fakery versus nature, friendship and the great outdoors. Sonny's faithful friend and manager Wendell is played by Willie Nelson (in his feature debut, reputedly ad-libbing most of his dialogue), bringing further authenticity to the cowboys; Wendell and Sonny, after yet another dispiriting tour date, drunkenly sing a song Nelson himself had a recent chart hit with: "Mamas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys/Cause they'll never stay home and they're always alone".

There are no shootouts, saloons or spurs in the language here, but aspiration to a gentle caring spirit and understanding of nature and the outdoors. The only 'bad guys' are the heads of corporations who care only for profit, represented in the film by an unusually cold, steely faced John Saxon. For its grand themes, director Pollack delivers them in an oblique and unassuming way; the sound design during scenes in Las Vegas has slot machines and tannoy announcements, disconcertingly, almost as loud as the dialogue itself, which only emphasises the clarity, stillness and simplicity of scenes in the great outdoors.

There are lots of great comic moments and funny, sharply delivered lines; no less than you might expect from repartee between Redford and Fonda. Valerie Perrine (memorable as Ms. Teschemacher in 1978's *Superman*) also plays a notable supporting role as Sonny's soon-to-be ex-wife and Wilfrid Brimley (*Cocoon*) plays a marvellously modest but key supporting role. For fans of 1970s kitsch, there is a bit of everything here that you might expect from the era; from cowboy rodeos and disco dancing Vegas showgirls to a full on horse-race multi-car chase à la *The Dukes of Hazzard* (with one especially impressive stunt, culminating in one police car tearing along whilst carrying another, upside down, on top of it!).

The screener copy available for review of this re-release had no menu or extras, but the picture quality is excellent and does justice to the stunning cinematography of both the Vegas spectacle and its vast surrounding desert scenery.