

The last gunslinger

With his rugged features and brooding on-screen presence, Jack Palance was one of Hollywood's go-to bad guys but, as Steve O'Brien explains, there was always more to this legendary Western star than meets the eye...



Every Oscars night throws up a clip that becomes one for the ages, and there can be few who will forget the defining moment of the 64th Academy Awards on 30 March 1992. When 74-year-old Jack Palance was announced as Best Supporting Actor for his role in the comedy *City Slickers*, he didn't shuffle up to the stage and weakly thank his co-stars, he strode up to the podium and, referencing a quote from the film, quipped of that year's host and co-star: 'Billy Crystal, I crap bigger than him,' before launching into a run of one-armed push-ups. The next morning, no-one was talking about *The Silence of the Lambs* scooping Best Picture or Jodie Foster's Best Actress speech, but this show of septuagenarian hardiness from one of Hollywood's longest-serving actors.

It seemed fitting that night that Palance, who'd made his name in Westerns, should win for his portrayal of the ageing cowboy *Curly Washburn*. As much as John Wayne or Clint Eastwood or Gary Cooper, Palance almost embodied the genre, with a face that looked like it was carved from granite, atop his commanding 6ft 4in frame. Yet despite establishing himself in that most all-American of movie genres, his ancestry was actually Ukrainian. Born in Pennsylvania in 1919, he was christened Volodymyr Palahniuk by his Catholic immigrant parents.

That contradiction of the all-American gunslinger mixed with his Eastern European heritage was, in some ways, the essence of Jack Palance, as he eventually renamed himself. He was a man of often baffling contrasts, a boxer and coal miner in his youth, but also a writer of poetry, with a passion for art. But while Hollywood only seemed to recognise Palance's hard-man qualities, it was that cultural hinterland that arguably gave his performances such depth and texture. Cast as the black-clad villain in the 1953 Western *Shane*, he's far more than just a menacing thug – there's something quiet and soulful in the character of Jack Wilson, a quality he brought to all the characters he played. As intimidating as *Curly* is in *City Slickers*, it was the glimpses of the vulnerabilities beneath that tough exterior that so wowed the Academy – and cinema audiences – in 1992.

FIGHTING HIS WAY OUT

Though he's best known for his bad-guy roles, there was always so much more to Jack Palance's career. His break came when he was chosen as Marlon Brando's understudy in a 1947 Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, appearing on stage as Stanley Kowalski after, according to legend anyway, accidentally punching Brando during a theatre workout. His turn as Tennessee Williams' animalistic anti-hero so impressed the play's director, Elia

Palance's daughter Holly played Damian's nanny, who hangs herself, in 1976's *The Omen*. She also played Lois Lane opposite Christopher Reeve in his screen test for *Superman* (1978).

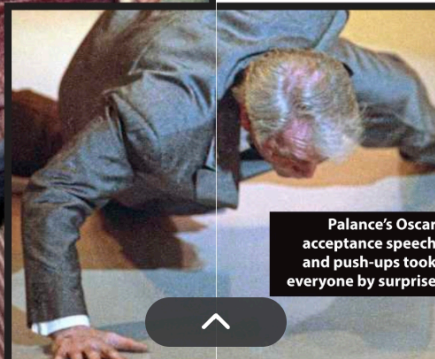
DID YOU KNOW?

Kazan, that he cast Palance in his first film role, as a gangster in the 1960 noir *Panic in the Streets*.

It was an arresting screen debut and within just two years he was nominated for his first Academy Award, for the thriller *Sudden Fear* (1952), an honour repeated in 1954, when he was up for Best Supporting Actor for *Shane*. It was a mesmeric performance, but it did typecast him as Hollywood's go-to villain for a number of years – he was a ruthless movie enforcer in *The Big Knife* (1955) and a fearsome Attila the Hun in *Sign of the Pagan* (1954), while other directors wanted some of the *Shane* magic by casting him as a Stetson-rocking baddie in a variety of Westerns, including *Arrowhead* (1953), *The Professionals* (1966) and *Compañeros* (1970).

Some directors – not enough however – were more imaginative in how they used the actor. He proved he was just as adept at conveying honesty and virtue as a German anti-Nazi bomb disposal expert in *Ten Seconds to Hell* (1959) and as a kind-hearted cowboy in William A. Fraker's *Monte Walsh* (1970). One of his most acclaimed roles, however, came on the small screen. Cast as washed-up boxer Harlan 'Mountain' McClintock in Rod Serling's TV play *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1956), he won a coveted Emmy Award for Best Actor.

Sadly, these richer, more nuanced parts were few and far ➤



Palance's Oscar acceptance speech and push-ups took everyone by surprise



Panic in the Streets director Elia Kazan predicted Palance would win an Oscar – it took 42 years



A German expert was hired to teach Palance bomb defusing techniques for the film *Ten Seconds to Hell*

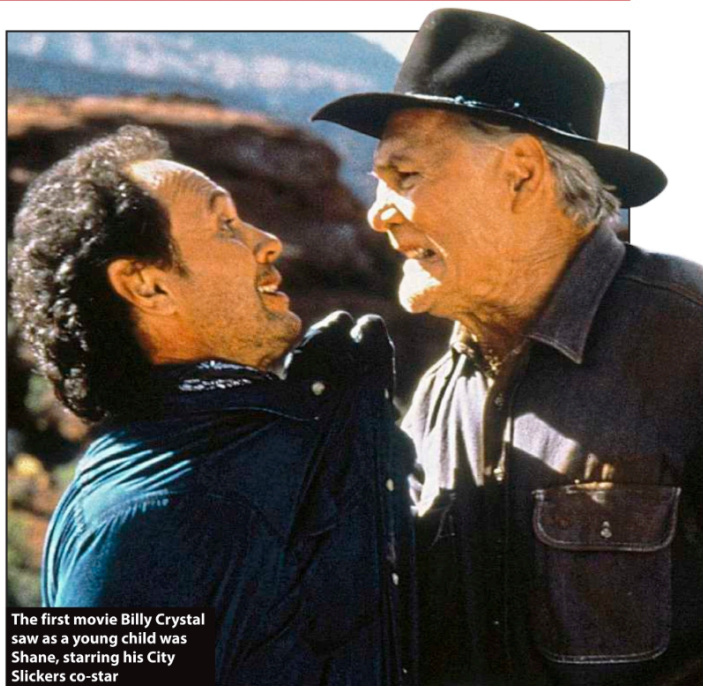
between and, at the height of his fame, he moved with his wife and children to Switzerland, hoping for a greater variety of jobs. But even in Europe he found himself offered 'the same kind of roles I left Hollywood because of' and he returned home. He was scornful of much of his work, once telling a reporter, 'Most of the stuff I do is garbage,' adding that a lot of the directors he worked with were incompetent. 'Most of them shouldn't even be directing traffic,' he once said.

SECOND ACT

One filmmaker who found himself the target of Palanca's ire was Tim Burton, who cast the actor as a crime boss in 1989's *Batman*. After calling 'action', it was clear Palanca hadn't heard the director, which led to a confrontation and ended with the exasperated actor telling the 30-year-old Burton: 'I've made over 100 films, how many have you made?'

Batman, as blockbusting as it was, was just a cameo. *City Slickers*, released two years later, would be the film that truly reintroduced the actor to cinemagoers. Billy Crystal, the film's star, said Palanca was the first name they thought of to play the imposing Curly Washburn, and it's hard to think of anyone who could combine that quiet intelligence with rock-hard machismo.

It was perhaps apt that Palanca won his Oscar for a Western, 39



The first movie Billy Crystal saw as a young child was *Shane*, starring his *City Slickers* co-star

years after being nominated for *Shane*. He would repeat the role of Curly in the sequel *City Slickers II* (1994) and go on to play such parts as Scrooge in a Western reimagining of *A Christmas Carol* (1998's *Ebenezer*) and Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* (1999) and was working until two years before his death, his final performance being the TV film *Back When We Were Grownups* (2004).

There may only be a smattering of classics in Jack Palanca's long and vast filmography, but he was always the best thing in whatever movie he made and often contributed more than was ever on the page to the roles he played. He was a man who brought a sensitivity and sagacity to even the most brutal and hard-nosed of characters. 'To act with him on *City Slickers* was a true blessing,' Billy Crystal said after Palanca's passing in 2006. 'Winning the Oscar for that movie and the one-arm push-ups he did on the show will link us together forever, and for that I am grateful. As intense, powerful and intimidating as he appeared on screen, he was just as sensitive, thoughtful and intelligent off it.'



Palanca was an avid painter and poet

DID YOU KNOW?

One of Palanca's more off-piste roles was as Count Dracula in the 1973 television film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, director Dan Curtis's adaptation of the celebrated horror novel.



Reel obsession

Simon Page of *Argyll and Bute* shares the seven films that feature on his list of all-time favourites

Everything about **GET CARTER** (1971) (1) makes it a brilliantly gritty thriller from the start. From the music and the urban settings to the opening scene on the train to Newcastle, where we discover that London gangster Jack Carter (Michael Caine) is on a mission to avenge his brother's death. Then there's that unforgettable ending, which will stay with me forever.

The film of James Ellroy's novel **L.A. CONFIDENTIAL** (1997) (2) is pitch perfect, seductively giving us a glimpse of the sleaze that lay beneath the veneer of Fifties Hollywood. Guy Pearce, Kevin Spacey and Russell Crowe star as LAPD officers in the story that contrasts the glamorous Los Angeles I grew up dreaming of and the dark underbelly of crushed dreams.

Of all the versions of John Buchan's story, the original **THE 39 STEPS** (1935) (3) with Robert Donat is my favourite. Shot in black and white it has noir and nostalgia in spades. Donat excels as Richard Hannay, a man trying to survive against the odds, hampered (and then helped) by Madeleine Carroll. It's an early twisty thriller

from *The Master of Suspense*, Alfred Hitchcock.

I love Westerns, having been reared watching John Wayne films, but for me **TOMBSTONE** (1993) (4) has got to be the best. Kurt Russell as Wyatt Earp is a simply inspired piece of casting (his moustache alone deserved some kind of award!). Sam Elliott, Bill Paxton and Val Kilmer are the rest of Earp's posse.

A very unconventional war film, Michael Cimino's **THE DEER HUNTER** (1978) (5) starts out at an amazing wedding party (to which you'd want an invite). Three best friends Michael (Robert De Niro), Steven (John Savage), and Nick (Christopher Walken) have their lives forever changed after signing up to serve in Vietnam. To call this film an epic is not an overstatement.

In **CASABLANCA** (1942) (6) Humphrey Bogart plays the cynical nightclub owner, Rick, trying to remain neutral during the Second World War. But his resolve is tested when a lost love, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), reappears. Once you've seen this film I challenge you not to want to 'play it again!'



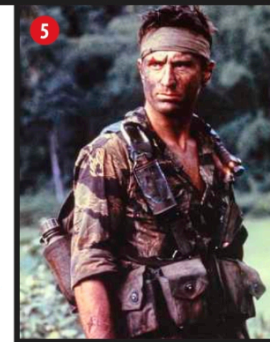
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Another epic film with a striking soundtrack is **THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS** (1992) (7). Daniel Day-Lewis excels as the romantic hero rescuing his lady love from the Huron people supported by the brave Chingachgook and Uncas, who are the last of the Mohicans.

Tell us your magnificent seven films and why they mean so much to you. Contact details on page 3