

Tension at Table Rock

by Emily Soares | March 24, 2003



He's a man who's been wrongly accused in a shooting and had a slanderous song written about him, featuring his name in the chorus. Wouldn't you be tempted to find a new moniker? Well, in **Tension at Table Rock** (1956), Wes Tancred (Richard Egan) does. And it gives him some peace - for a while. The film is partly about the typical things that occur in Westerns - gunslingers that run amuck in a God-fearing town, frontier wives whose heads are turned by strong, silent strangers, the hardships of life on the range. But it's also about the courage it takes to face the past, about heroes who aren't so heroic and about cowards who turn out to be heroes.

At the film's open, Tancred hits the road trying to escape the infamy that a defensive and officially pardoned killing of a one-time friend brings him. He soon finds himself in a Wells Fargo outpost managed by a kindly man and his son. It is here that Tancred tries to lead a trouble-free existence under a new name and identity. But when a group of thugs tries to rob the coach, Tancred finds himself reluctantly prodded into action after the boy, Jody (Billy Chapin), is left an orphan. Jody's uncle (Cameron Mitchell) is sheriff of nearby Table Rock and Tancred takes him there, discovering that the sheriff is a man fighting private demons of his own. Complicating the situation is the sheriff's bombshell wife (Dorothy Malone) who'd make any man nervous. Turns out that the sheriff took a hell of a beating some years back and never really got over it. His wife has stuck with him through thick and thin, but when she lays eyes on Tancred, the storm clouds start to gather.

Richard Egan was not only a hunk of a leading man; he was also quite the academician. A high-ranking officer in WWII, he earned a graduate degree from Stanford and attended and taught at Northwestern University as well. But he left it all behind and headed to Hollywood where his athletic physique made him a natural action-adventure actor. He isn't, however, known for his comic timing or high-energy screen presence, so Egan's film career was restricted to certain types of movies. He followed **Tension at Table Rock** with *Love Me Tender* (1956) and went on to play more cowboys, soldiers, and similar heroic figures. He also played the lead in the television series *Empire* (1962-1964).

As the sheriff's wife and Tancred's catnip, Dorothy Malone went from model, to ingenue, to leading actress and did ultimately manage to get some well-deserved and remembered roles like an Oscar®-winning performance in *Written on the Wind* (1956), *Man of a Thousand Faces* (1957) and the television soap opera *Peyton Place* (1964-1968). The sheriff, Cameron Mitchell, like Egan, was a multi-purpose leading man but had an equally successful stage career, well-known for his role as Happy in *Death of a Salesman*, which he reprised in the screen version in 1951. His film and television career was impressively long and prolific, though he may be best remembered as Buck Cannon in the series *High Chaparral*. Billy Chapin (*The Night of the Hunter*, 1955) delivers a solid performance as the boy who believes the popular lies about Tancred, but is willing to learn the truth when he discovers his new friend is none other than the "black-hearted, white-livered, back-biting, sidewinder" whose song he once loved to sing.

Tension at Table Rock has its share of notable cameos as well. Angie Dickinson appears at the film's open as the gal who starts all the trouble by throwing herself at a disinterested Tancred. When her jealous husband tries to shoot Tancred in the back but ends up dead instead, she tells the lie that spawns the rumor - that Tancred shot his best friend in the back. And though you'll have to hold out till the film's end to see him, DeForest Kelley (Dr. Bones) is worth the wait as a hired assassin and old friend of Tancred's, who shows up for a showdown with the sheriff.

Producer: Sam Wiesenthal

Director: Charles Marquis Warren

Screenplay: Winston Miller, based on a novel by Frank Gruber

Art Direction: Albert S. D'Agostino, John Mansbridge

Cinematography: Joseph F. Biroc

Editing: Dean Harrison, Harry Marker

Music: Josef Myrow, Dimitri Tiomkin, Ned Washington, Robert Wells

Cast: Richard Egan (Wes Tancred), Dorothy Malone (Lorna), Cameron Mitchell (Sheriff Miller), Billy Chapin (Jody), Royal Dano (Harry Jameson), Edward Andrews (Kirk), John Dehner (Hampton), DeForest Kelly (Jim Breck), Angie Dickinson (Cathy).

C-94m. Closed captioning.

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