

Dances With Wolves offers an alternative view on how the west was won
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Movies that tell a good story and have engaging characters provide that all-important re-watch value necessary for a great film. Arts editor Andrew Clarke presents a series of idiosyncratic suggestions for movies which may entertain if you are in the mood for something different.

Arts Editor

Dances With Wolves; dir: Kevin Costner; starring: Kevin Costner, Mary McDonnell, Graham Greene, Rodney A Grant, Floyd Red Crow Westerman. Cert: 12 (1990)

Just when you think the western is extinct, a movie comes along which offers a brief flickering hope that the genre can be revived but we are invariably dismayed when the whole thing swiftly becomes dormant again. It's happened with the Coen Brothers True Grit, Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained and The Hateful Eight as well as the arthouse hit Meek's Cutoff starring Michelle Williams but nothing has made a bigger impact or offered more hope of a sustained revival than Kevin Costner's Oscar-winning epic Dances With Wolves.

Clocking in at just over three hours, it was a monster, albeit an exquisitely photographed monster, that entranced and beguiled as it told a story of personal redemption and racial tolerance.

In many ways Dances With Wolves was a film that David Lean could have made 30 years earlier. It set a very personal story against a vast Cinemascope landscape, filled with gorgeous vistas, beautifully composed music, explosive action and a thoughtful narrative.

It was a film that demanded that you viewed it on the big screen and that you experienced this cinematic event in the company of friends and family.

It was a film that broke all the cinematic rules. To accepted marketing lore, this should have been a film that was dead in the water before it was even released.

The fact that it was a western was unusual enough but that it crashed through the unofficial two hour running time barrier was almost unheard of (at that time), it had no mainstream stars, apart from Costner, to attract audiences, and what should have been a guaranteed sign of commercial suicide was the fact that almost 80% of the film was sub-titled. The bulk of the film's actors spoke a language that even many of today's Native Americans would not be able to understand.

There was no teen romance, no conspicuous special effects, no revisionist take on history with which to court younger audiences and yet it proved to be a huge hit.

The reason for this was that it was a film with an engaging story, that lit up the screen and dazzled everyone who saw it. Three hours disappeared in a blink of an eye. People forgot they were reading sub-titles and for the first time in two generations they fell in love with the romance of the Old West.

This was a love letter to a different way of life -- an apology for past wrongs and an acknowledgement that perhaps the so-called coming of civilisation wasn't as wonderful as the settlers thought it was.

Told through the eyes of a lone cavalry officer, John Dunbar (Kevin Costner), who has been sent to an isolated outpost on the Dakota prairies.

Dunbar is a courageous, some would say reckless soldier, and in the opening scenes we see him offer himself up in what seem a suicidal charge on Confederate lines during the American Civil War. After recovering from his wounds, he asks to be posted to the frontier so he can see the wilderness before it goes.

Alone in a sod-built outpost, happy with his own company, he forms a relationship with a curious young wolf. Passing Sioux warriors see him playing with the animal and thinking he is suffering from some form of mental illness make contact.

Slowly a bond forms between them. The tribe's medicine man, played with fantastic dignity and bearing by Graham Greene, knows more European settlers are coming and sees that a friendship with Dunbar is a good way to understand these strangers.

When Dunbar finds an injured woman on the prairie, he takes her back to Sioux encampment and begins to integrate himself more fully into their world. The injured woman *Stands With A Fist* (Mary McDonnell) is a white woman, captured as a child, and raised as one of their own. Now widowed she becomes a bridge allowing Dunbar to become part of the tribe.

Although, the cinematography is lush and romantic, the story is not sentimentalised at all. The Sioux are all strong characters. Some of the tribe are suspicious of Dunbar and are very unwelcoming and their on-going war with rival tribe. The Pawnee over territory is brutal. But, what is completely absorbing is the chance to see a completely different way of life. We get to see the world through their eyes and this is something of shameful rarity in Hollywood. This was clearly a passion project and is delivered with absolute integrity.

An Alternative Guide to Great Movies: *Dances With Wolves* (1990)

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