



## TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Monday 31 March 2008

**Media Film and Technology**  
**Film Review – Tommy Lee Jones**  
**John J McGowan**

There are certain actors whom you get to know gradually. It's almost like building up a friendship with them. They don't come leaping into your awareness with a blaze of publicity but you slowly become aware – after seeing them in perhaps several movies – that they enhance any movie in which they have a role even if that role is not the major one. You come to know that if they manage to snare a good role they will deliver the goods and it will be great to watch.

There's a man called Tommy Lee Jones who falls into this category. It's taken quite a while for me to cement a friendship with Tommy Lee Jones – given that his first movie role was 38 years ago in *Love Story* – but, these days, if I see his name in the cast of a movie I will go along with the expectation of getting great enjoyment out of spending a little time with this talented actor.

I didn't pay much attention to Tommy Lee Jones before his role as the homicidal looney bad guy in the Stephen Seagal action movie *Under Siege*. That was around sixteen years ago. Since that time I've taken a special interest in movies in which this Harvard-educated eighth-generation Texan has appeared.

Some of these movies have been forgettable – albeit very successful at the box office – like the two *Men in Black* science fiction flix – but most of the rest have been rewarding viewing made all the better by Tommy Lee's performances. He won a well-deserved Oscar in 1993 for his supporting role in *The Fugitive* in which he played the lawman who pursues his quarry relentlessly.

Amongst his other more recent performances I thought his participation in *The Missing* in 2003 was outstanding. His role in this hard-edged western seemed to be made to measure for him. His weather-beaten features and taciturn speech patterns were tailor-made for the part of the estranged father who turns up just in time to help his daughter search for a child who has been kidnapped by renegade Indians.

It's pleasing to note that business is picking up for this man who, for quite some time, has had the appearance of a sixty-year-old but who is actually only just sixty-two.

Currently he is appearing in two major movies and received an Oscar nomination for his role in one of them. Both of these movies are thrillers but, that said, there is little similarity between them. The first I will look at – *No Country for Old Men* – did well at this year's Academy Awards, snaring an Oscar for Best Picture and another for its directors, the legendary Coen brothers.

*No Country for Old Men* is a contemporary western. As a brief aside let me say that the western has often been declared dead – or at least passé – as a genre. However time and again it has proved to be absolutely resilient and capable of regeneration in a way that continues to provide engaging

entertainment. I personally find it completely pointless to assert that any particular style of movie has had its day when all it takes to revive it is a good script and a touch of creativity.

And this is certainly the case with *No Country for Old Men*. As with most westerns the plot is simple. A man stumbles upon a bag of money – in this case it's the proceeds of a drug deal gone wrong. He keeps the money but this makes him the quarry of a cold-blooded psychopathic killer who is out to retrieve the loot. A third major character – a local Sheriff played by Tommy Lee Jones – is on the trail of both of the other characters with the intention of trying to save the neck of one of them while hunting down the other.

As with most Coen brothers movies *No Country for Old Men* is coloured with a touch of the surreal. It's not supposed to be real life. However, that takes nothing away from this movie. Again and again we are drawn into situations in which life itself – in terms of the movie – hangs by a whisker. In a couple of instances it depends literally on the toss of a coin. These coin tossing sequences are a deliberate quotation from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* and there plenty of other reminders of the good old spaghetti westerns in *No Country for Old Men*.

However, *No Country for Old Men* is a far better movie and it absolutely quivers with dramatic tension. It's rare to find a movie which has so many separate sequences in which the tension is built to an almost unbearable level. It is one of those movies that draws you in to its world of threat and violence until – even in the comfort and security of the darkened picture theatre - you find yourself shaking in your shoes.

The movie also provides a great feeling for location - whether it be desert landscapes or seedy motel rooms. The performances by all the major players are excellent – with Tommy Lee Jones just perfect as the world-weary Sheriff on the verge of retirement.

*No Country for Old Men* is a first rate thriller and I gave it four and a half stars.

The other movie I'll look at in this program is *The Valley of Elah*. Tommy Lee Jones takes the leading role in this and received an Oscar nomination for his splendid depiction of a father searching for answers to explain the disappearance of his soldier son. This movie is also a thriller but - although it is totally absorbing - it doesn't seek to construct the knife-edge tension of *No Country for Old Men*.

*The Valley of Elah* is an anti- Iraq war movie. The plot turns on the issue of the ways in which exposure to the horrors of this war corrupts the morals of those who take part in it. While the movie is set in a contemporary military barracks town in the United States the back-story of a group of soldiers serving in Iraq is cleverly revealed by the gradual unscrambling of distorted images recorded on a mobile phone camera.

The character played by Tommy Lee Jones is a retired military policeman.

By the way in which he carefully and routinely makes his bed, shines his shoes and creases his trousers we are shown that he is still wedded to the disciplines of army life. He is proud of his service and of the flag under which he served. Now he is thrown into a situation in which he is forced to re-assess his views about military life and, indeed, about the country in which he lives. He discovers that the army in which he served is now tainted by drugs and standards of behaviour that he would have abhorred. He must deal with this while he struggles to learn the truth about his son's disappearance. His character requires great acting to encompass all of these shades of emotional turmoil and Tommy Lee Jones is, once again, perfect for the part. He is well supported by Charlize Theron as a newly-appointed detective who must fight her own battles with her male chauvinist superiors while pushing to have the case of the missing soldier properly investigated.

*The Valley of Elah* is an uncompromising movie inspired, we are told, by actual events. We come to know, early on, that there will likely be no room for a happy ending in this tragic story. It's a tribute to writer-director Paul Haggis that he manages to confront us with so many unpleasant issues without any risk of losing our attention by embedding these elements within the context of a first rate detective thriller. Its content makes it far from being an easy movie but its story is unfolded with brilliant movie-making craftsmanship. I gave *The Valley of Elah* four stars.

Bye for now – I'll see you in the back stalls.

John McGowan  
31.03.08