



Appaloosa

Ed Harris, Viggo Mortensen and Renee Zellweger star in a film written by Robert Knott and Ed Harris, based upon the novel by Robert Parker and directed by Harris.

By Josef Woodard

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In the film acting game, a rare breed of artist both embodies and seems to embrace the ideal of actor-as-chameleon, taking radically shifting roles as a basic artistic challenge. Among recent examples of such virtuosos, we think of [Cate Blanchett](#) and of [Ed Harris](#). In recent years, Harris has masterfully portrayed turbulent artists **Jackson Pollock** (in the Harris-directed *Pollock*) and **Beethoven** (in the shamefully underrated *Copying Beethoven*, and now a hat-donning Wild West protagonist in [Appaloosa](#), which Harris also directed and adapted from the novel by **Robert Parker**.

Wait, what's this: the Pollock/Beethoven actor as western gunhand hero, a self-appointed lawman and bringer of justice to a formerly lawless town? You bet. With his brute, laconic intensity and chiseled jaw harboring a simmering rage and a personal notion of justice, Harris is a true blue natural in the genre and the role. Actually, part of what makes *Appaloosa* so

peculiarly fascinating are the details, shortcomings, and nuances in that very character, as well as that of his slightly more sensitive sidekick, deftly played by [Viggo Mortensen](#).

Complicating and enriching the storyline is the female interest, played by [Renee Zellweger](#), whose greatest of frontier fears is loneliness. [Jeremy Irons](#) pulls of one of his best eloquent snake performances as the charming villain. “You’ll never hang me, Cole,” he says. “Never’s a long time,” says Harris, with minimal mouth movement. Cinematographer **Dean Semler** does a stellar job with the visual feel, although the all-important atmosphere veers off course with **Jeff Beal**’s musical score, which valiantly attempts at a rugged, rural milieu, but can’t get off the Hollywood freeway. It’s a small problem, but notable mainly because tone and texture are so important to the end result.

Repeatedly, yet without pretentious genre-gaming, *Appaloosa* both plays with and against type. Conceptually, the film feels like an unlikely offspring, as both a variation on the John Ford-style American Western tradition and a case of the latter-day spinoff — a post-*Unforgiven*, post-*Deadwood* twist on the genre. An ironic OK Corral-style climax, for instance, becomes an extended coda, and the churnings of genre clichés keep giving way to reflective moments when time grinds pleasantly to a halt to take in the light and the land — or the lazy geometry of Harris’s lean body perched on the marshal’s porch. The chameleon triumphs, yet again, in yet another direction.