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Film Discussion Group
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The Homesman (dir. Tommy Lee Jones, 2014)

On Camera

Mary Bee Cuddy: Hilary Swank: two Oscars for *Boys Don't Cry* (99), *Million Dollar Baby* (04); also noteworthy in *Insomnia* (02), *Conviction* (10), *You're Not You* (14)

“George Briggs”: Tommy Lee Jones: *Coal Miner's Daughter* (80); “Lonesome Dove” (89); Oscar for *The Fugitive* (93); *No Country for Old Men* (07); *Lincoln* (12)

Gro (blonde hair): Sonja Richter: Rising star in Danish movies, such as *The Miracle* (13)

Theoline (red): Miranda Otto: *The Thin Red Line* (98); the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (01-03)

Arabella (brown): Grace Gummer: *Frances Ha* (12); “The Newsroom” (13-14); Streep's daughter

Rev. Dowd: John Lithgow: A stern man of God in *Kinsey* (04); *Love Is Strange* (14)

Aloysius (hotel): James Spader: *sex, lies, and videotape* (89); “The Blacklist” (13-14)

Altha Carter: Meryl Streep: My favorites are *Silkwood* (83), *Bridges of Madison County* (95)

Tabitha (at end): Hailee Steinfeld: *True Grit* (10); *Romeo and Juliet* (13); *Begin Again* (13)

Off Camera

Screenplay Jones, Kieran Fitzgerald, and Wesley Oliver, from Glendon Swarthout's novel

Cinematography Rodrigo Prieto: *Amores perros* (00); *Frida* (02); *Brokeback Mountain* (05)

Editing Roberto Silvi: all Jones's films as director; multiple films with John Huston

Musical Score: Marco Beltrami: *3:10 to Yuma* (07); *The Hurt Locker* (08); several horror films

Tommy Lee Jones's other films as director

The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (2005) – After a Texas border patrolman shoots a Mexican ranch hand, the dead man's possibly crazy employer takes the shooter prisoner and forces him to atone for the killing; Best Actor, Best Screenplay at Cannes Film Festival.

The Sunset Limited (2011, HBO) – Jones and Samuel L. Jackson star in Cormac McCarthy's adaptation of his own play about a disillusioned professor who has thrown himself onto some subway tracks and the bystander who rescues him and grills him about his suicidal feelings.

Two classics that align nicely with *The Homesman*, both directed by John Ford

The Searchers (1956) – A racist ex-Confederate officer embarks on a long journey in pursuit of the Comanche tribe who abducted his niece and slayed her family; with John Wayne and Natalie Wood; famously unsettled hero/villain assumptions and politics in the Western.

7 Women (1966) – A group of female missionaries in China hold their ground against a Mongol army surrounding them on all sides in the 1930s; with Anne Bancroft and Margaret Leighton.

More recent films you might compare and contrast with *The Homesman*...

Unforgiven (1992) – Clint Eastwood’s dark, career-reviving, Oscar-winning revisionist Western stresses the harsh lots of women in the Old West and aligns us with a complicated hero.

The Ballad of Little Jo (1993) – A woman survives in the Old West by disguising herself as a man, at least until falling in love with an Asian immigrant; with Suzy Amis, Ian McKellen.

The Missing (2003) – A retooled *Searchers*, with Cate Blanchett raising two daughters alone in 19th-century New Mexico; when one is kidnapped, she pursues her, with help from her long-absent father (Tommy Lee Jones), who has partly assimilated into Native American culture.

No Country for Old Men (2007) – Multiple men in Texas, including Tommy Lee Jones’s disenchanted sheriff, chase (and are chased by) Javier Bardem’s cryptic, implacable killer.

There Will Be Blood (2007) – Daniel Day-Lewis won an Oscar as an increasingly tyrannical oil man deranged by greed and guilt, in this modern riposte to American myths of frontier glory.

Meek’s Cutoff (2010) – In the 1840s, a group of female settlers trek across the Oregon desert, led by a man they do not trust and his Native American captive; starring Michelle Williams.

True Grit (2010) – The Coen Brothers’ remake of the 1969 John Wayne–Kim Darby classic hews closer to the book, stressing the resolve of the young girl avenging her father’s murder.

Facts about *The Homesman* you may appreciate...

Paul Newman owned the rights to the 1988 novel for several years and hoped to star as Briggs in a version he would have directed himself. Several other Swarthout have been made as films.

The movie was shot in Georgia and New Mexico, by a Mexican cinematographer whose career-making feature was *Amores perros*, for *Birdman* director Alejandro González Iñárritu.

In *Boys Don’t Cry*, her Oscar-winning breakthrough, Hilary Swank played a transgender man who meets his tragic death in Nebraska. Typecast in roles that emphasize fearless resolve, she played a lonely female boxer in *Million Dollar Baby*, who also meets a premature end.

Broad conversation topics...

Madness: Especially since Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), a recurring idea in feminist literary criticism is that the “mad” female characters of 19th-century texts like *Jane Eyre* often reflect cultural impulses to dismiss or stereotype the experiences of women who defied norms of decorum or femininity. *The Homesman* is thus bucking a longstanding trend in storytelling by refusing to downplay the women’s madness, or to present it as lying “in the eye of the beholder.” What did you make of the extremity of these women’s distress, and how the actresses conveyed it, and how it did or did not change?

Beginnings: The early episode where Mary Bee entertains Bob Giffen at home with dinner and music is not invoked until 50 pages into the novel, which instead begins with Theoline losing her mind at the birth of yet another child. Through the first half of the movie, what sense has it made that we started with Mary Bee, her solitude, and her attempt to recruit a husband? By the end of the film, what new ideas do you have about why the movie begins there?

Editing: Once the journey begins, scenes along the way are often edited as short episodes, less “developed” than we might expect (i.e., the truncated encounter with the Pawnee), and often ending with dissolves or fades into and out of black rather than blunt, firm cuts. Those kinds of edits can obscure how much time has passed, or confer a dreamlike feeling on how scenes bleed into each other. What sense do these choices make to you, regarding *this* story?

Image: You can imagine the pressures to light and design every landscape to be gorgeous (which might make *The Homesman* more marketable and audience-friendly) or, by contrast, to make every single image hardscrabble and austere (suggesting that *anyone* would be hard-pressed to stay sane in such a brutal, inhospitable environment). Instead, this film oscillates between beautiful and bleak views of the land. When did you notice the film tipping heavily in one direction or the other, and how did that background affect your response to that scene?

Music: Composer Marco Beltrami has worked extensively in the horror genre, while also doing his time in “serious,” upscale dramas, in film and on TV. His score for *The Homesman* has traces of both these aesthetics. When did you notice the music going out of its way to be eerie, and when did it seem more classical or “period”? What sense does this mixture make?

America: We could approach *The Homesman* as a kind of Midwestern *Odyssey* or *Pilgrim’s Progress*, departing from a scene of great despair, and hoping not just to survive a difficult journey but to learn valuable moral lessons along the way. When does the movie seem most to suggest that kind of structure? What *impediments* do you see to understanding it this way? What metaphorical meanings do you ascribe to the specific people or obstacles our characters meet, and what larger view(s) of mid-19th century or even modern America do they imply?

Endings: Surely most viewers will be surprised by how *The Homesman* unfolds in its last half-hour. How do you interpret the specific outcomes, regarding which characters do and don’t survive to the end? For those who succumb, what choices or values appeared to do them in? For those who persist, what accounts for their survival, and their decision to keep moving? What did you think about the finale’s strange mix of exuberance, violence, and darkness?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Art Direction: The screenplay clearly specifies that Mary Bee’s journey begins in May. She hopes to reach Hebron, Iowa, by July 4, yet we frequently see snow on the ground and hear allusions to a “hard winter.” What literal or metaphorical meanings might this weather hold? In general, how or why did the film manipulate or confuse your hold on the passage of time?

Score: Notice the lively acoustic guitar that newly insinuates itself into the score as we behold Mary Bee plowing her field—a musical way of characterizing her as an energetic presence.

Perspective: One of our first shots of Mary Bee is through two sets of open, square-shaped doors in her barn. This is a classic kind of shot in American westerns, especially those of John Ford, and places *The Homesman* in dialogue with them—even though Jones has insisted he doesn’t see this movie as a western. In another sense, it’s also a way of seeing Mary Bee and her life as somewhat “boxed in,” despite what we hear about her hard-won resources.

Behavior: We soon see Mary Bee smoothing wrinkles in her tablecloth, placing a vase dead-center in the table, and smoothing her hair. Hardy souls on the frontier are often portrayed in movies as leaving such priorities behind—too busy surviving a difficult life to worry about folds and combs. What does it mean, especially by the film’s end, that Mary Bee still cares?

Framing: Mary Bee and Giffen are confined to separate close-ups once she’s proposing, despite many earlier shots that grouped them in the same frame. They only reestablish a visual link after he has called her “bossy” and “plain,” as though her relationships to other people are defined more by their *rejections* of her than by her visions of how they could help each other.

Allusions: The detail about Mary Bee’s textile melodeon is in Swarthout’s 1988 novel but also harkens to *The Piano*, with Holly Hunter as a mail-order bride in barely-settled New Zealand, who carves piano keys into a table and “plays” them until she’s reunited with her instrument. *The Piano* won three Academy Awards the same year Tommy Lee Jones won his Oscar.

Harsh Cuts: An ominous, tolling bell accompanies the cut from Mary Bee with Giffen to life in the Belknap household; the color palette is instantly more bleached and the image rougher. These are clear signals of having entered a more desolate scenario (even emotionally) but may lead us to assume that Mary Bee’s situation starkly differs from these scenes of agony.

Lighting: The sun is still blazing yellow outside when Mary Bee talks to Rev. Dowd about going to bed: either a sign of a different lifestyle or a signal that she’s cutting their talk short.

Camera: The camera’s steady zoom toward Gro Svendsen as her husband forces himself on her (in a livestock stable, no less) visually reinforces the sense of suffocating encroachment.

Production Design: The tiny church suggests there might be more residents of this town but not *many* more. We gather that few people cared to attend these deliberations, but also that the local population is sparse anyway. How does this information inform Mary Bee’s choice?

Characterization: In the novel, Rev. Dowd offers right after the meeting to replace Mary Bee as homesman; in the film, he only offers once things are so far underway that the town is barely visible on the horizon. The silent cut back to Mary Bee implies she knows the offer is empty.

Characterization: The black smoke of being blasted out of Giffen’s cabin clings to Briggs even after he has dressed. Strangely, the instrument he introduces to the score is a gentle violin.

Image: Mary Bee and Briggs not only wash their faces at the same time but are visually superimposed on top of each other as they do so. Is the film suggesting a likeness between them?

Derangement: As Gro watches her mother vigorously sweep the floor, either *she* has gone crazy (isn’t this woman dead?) or else the *film* has (random flashbacks can happen at any time?).

Sound: Notice how the film refuses music even in emotionally volatile moments, such as Mary Bee’s loading of 19-year-old Arabella into the wagon. In general, the movie keeps its score and even its other sound elements on a fairly tight leash. What is the effect of all this quiet?

Genre: Did anyone else think Theoline was going to burst from behind those quilts and attack her eerily similar-looking daughters while Mary Bee was urging them to love her? What did you make of moments when the film seemed to exploit the crazy women for possible scares?

Costumes: Surely Mary Bee has a limited repertoire of clothes, and yet she barely ever repeats an outfit once they're on the trip. Why would she pack (or parade) so many clothes? Is she trying to have an effect on Briggs? Is she not as intent on returning as we thought she was?

Characterization: Mary Bee emits tears and overt distress at Gro's wails from the wagon. This is not a story of a steely woman who only gradually becomes prone to emotion. (The strings sound deranged at the end of this scene; it's unclear which or how many women are wailing.)

Foiled Precedent: The short scene of Mary Bee bathing all three charges in a river creates an expectation in later scenes when Briggs approaches water that we hear before we see. The first time, rather than find Mary Bee bathing, she's playing her "melodeon" at riverside. The next time he approaches her in a sun-dappled glade, the revelation is even more surprising.

Overtones: After Mary Bee launders the women's garments, we see them atop the wagon. They are red, white, and blue. Then we cut to a *very* different scene of a woman tending garments.

Lost: The violins give way to deeper, darker cellos as Mary Bee tries to make her way back from "re-burying" an 11-year-old girl by herself. She eats grass with her horses, while the score reprises a motif that sounds like a warped version of "Que Sera Sera." Do you see this scene as marking a fundamental break in Mary Bee's character or exacerbating rifts that are already there? She wails that Briggs built her no fire. Did you understand her as having *mistakenly* thought he cared about her, only to realize he didn't? Or has she realized that even if he *does* admire her (as later seems the case), life on the frontier prioritizes self-preservation over all?

Screenplay: Soon afterward, Mary Bee makes Briggs two consecutive, related offers that we are not expecting. If you sift backward for evidence that Mary Bee harbored such plans earlier, what do you find? If you interpret it as an abrupt shift in her mind, how do you explain it?

Motive: Mary Bee newly credits Briggs with a high character for taking this trip with her—a moment the trailers have mined for "inspirational" value. Yet in context, Briggs counters almost immediately that he's only in it for the \$300. Is Mary Bee over-estimating him? Is he under-selling himself? Does this mismatch inform your sense of things that happen next?

POV: As a key event unfolds between Briggs and Mary Bee, the film cuts to the women. Then it does something it hardly ever does and visually adopts their perspective on it. Why *here*?

Characterization: Jones shows us that Briggs is slow and contemplative as he lights a building on fire; this is not a rash or panicky act. What does that tell us about him, or about the scene?

Destination: We finally meet a key character near the end about whom we have heard a lot. We have ample time to compare our direct impressions of this character to previously gleaned testimonies. Based on these impressions, what do you predict for the remaining characters?