

The Paleface



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Norman Z. McLeod. Produced by Robert L. Welch. Written by Jack Rose & Melville Shavelson. Screenplay by Edmond Hartmann & Frank Tashlin. Cinematography by Ray Rennahan. Art Direction by Hans Drier & Earl Hedrick. Original Music by Victor Young. Song: 'Buttons and Bows by Jay Livingston &

Ray Evans. Edited by Ellsworth Hoagland. Key Costumer: Mary Kay Dodson. Cinematic length: 91 minutes. DVD length 89 minutes. Distributed and produced by Paramount Pictures. Cinematic release: December 1948 (USA) 1949 in most other countries. DVD release 2006. Available on U-tube. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

Bob Hope as Painless Potter * Jane Russell as Calamity Jane

Robert Armstrong as Terris * Iris Adrian as Pepper

Bobby Watson as Toby Preston * Jackie Searl as Jasper Martin

Joseph Vitale as the Indian Scout * Charles Trowbridge as Gov. Johnson

Clem Bevans as Hank Billings * Jeff York as Big Joe

Stanley Andrews as Commissioner Emerson * Wade Crosby as Jeb

Chief Yowlachie as Chief Yellow Feather

Iron Eyes Cody as Chief Iron Eyes

John Maxwell as Village gossip * Tom Kennedy as Bartender

Henry Brandon as Wapato * Francis McDonald as Lance

Frank Hagney as Pete * Olin Howland as the undertaker

Review

The Paleface is a whimsical, high energy, delightfully ridiculous depiction of an impossible romance, between an easily addled, meek and inept dentist, Painless Potter (Bob Hope) and Calamity Jane (Jane Russell). That legendary appellation brings to mind a combination of fierce independence, decisiveness, ruthlessness, trouble and expertise when it comes to surviving in the Wild West. After seeing the corpses from one of Calamity's shootings Painless concludes that he wants to go back east "where men are not men but they are not corpses either." With amusing irony this nervy, self-described coward becomes one of the west's great heroes, even if he was not really. He does find out that heroism can be a very dangerous and complicated quality – and something he wants to live up to.



The wagon train people acclaim Painless as a hero for killing Indian attackers.



The gunfighters like colts; Painless in the barrel and Calamity in the bathhouse



How do these pair meet? Calamity is sprung from jail by the governor (Charles Trowbridge) and offered a free pardon if she finds the gang gunrunning to the Indians. The gang are part of a westward wagon train, so she must go incognito, posing as the wife of another secret agent who will have the wagon. The trouble is she finds the other agent shot dead in his office and the gang trail her on the street, so she hides in a nearby bath house where Painless operates in the foyer – and flees in his wagon when another dissatisfied customer gives him fifteen minutes to get out of town. “The last town gave me twenty minutes” Painless quips. Also fleeing town is Calamity after shooting her three stalkers and she jumps onto the nearest available passing wagon, this being Potter’s. She needs a wagon and a pretend husband, so...

Hope’s famous one liner quips come thick and fast and Russell gets a few sardonic ones in as well as he tries to romance her and she plays him, going hot and cold as needed on her hidden agenda to get the gunrunners. Sight gags abound and it all happens in a gloriously gaudy technicolor. *The Paleface* has attacking Indians, scowling villains galore, Jane facing being burnt at the stake by Indians, massive explosions, a gunfight in the middle of the town’s main street, sassy singing dance hall gals in revealing costumes, a cold calculating mastermind villain in a three piece suit and a moustache, Indian chiefs in war bonnets who speak broken English, a sudden shootout in the bar and an exciting chase with Indians going after a speeding wagon full of dynamite. All the previously mentioned scenarios, clichés and events are all simultaneously spoofed and celebrated. As Umberto Eco said, when one stereotype turns up it is a cliché, when they all do it is a celebration. *The Paleface* is also smoothly done as director Norman Z. McLeod was an adept Hollywood hand at filming big stars in comedy. He also worked with the Marx Brothers, with Danny Kaye and with Bob Hope again in the similar *Alias Jesse James* (1959).

The academy award-winning song ‘Buttons and Bows’ captures the film’s jaunty mood, Hope’s hopes of going back east and his obviously impossible desire to make Calamity into a demure eastern housewife decked out in buttons and bows. If ever a man was deluded about his wife, Painless is it. Occasionally a few half-serious moments emerge for a wise contrast. Also as a contrast to the quips (this is a very talky western) and as an excitement is the stunt work. Remarkable stunts pepper the film.

This became one of Hope's highest grossing films and revitalized Russell's career. It got mixed reviews from critics (who are usually not whimsical) but was more than successful enough with the public to inspire a popular sequel four years later, *Son of Paleface*.



Although it seems the last possible western to contain grains of truth, Calamity Jane was a real person and despite her tough reputation, as in this film she was also known for her moments of compassion. In reality compassion was for the sick and the destitute, tough guys got the Jane Russell treatment, verbally. The rest of it in this movie is Hollywood; she did not shoot Indians or outlaws. Even more amazingly, there really was a Painless Potter. He managed to be even more of a showman than in this film's depiction. A dentist in the 1890s west, he made that appellation his legal name, offered \$5 to any patient who said they suffered pain, and he used an orchestra to drown out the patient's cries. Apparently he also used dancing girls for a distraction.

This reality sounds more like Bob Hope than Bob Hope.



1940s studio portraits of Russell and Hope





Norman Z. McLeod

1898-1964