

Reading Homework

Aging Icons of the Western

One thing we notice about Westerns is that the stories are very often about young men, but the actors playing these characters are older. In *Stagecoach*, a thirty-two-year-old John Wayne played the Ringo Kid who we can assume is supposed to be about nineteen. In *The Left Handed Gun*, a thirty-three-year-old Paul Newman played a twenty-year-old Billy



The Kid. That very same year, 1958, a fifty-six-year-old Gary Cooper played a character who was supposed to be twenty years younger. Even Mrs. Starrett in *Shane* was played by Jean Arthur who was probably twenty years older than her character was meant to be.

But it is *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* where the difference between the age of the actors and characters was most extreme. In 1962, John Wayne was fifty-five years old and James Stewart was fifty-four, yet they portray characters who are supposed to be about twenty-five years old (fully thirty years younger than the actors). Why did John Ford choose to cast such old actors in these roles? There are many theories, but the simple truth is that he had no choice. By 1962, Ford himself was sixty-eight and the golden age of Western films was almost over. The genre was in rapid decline overall, (although the 1963 *How The West Was Won* would still be a huge moneymaker). By 1962, Ford

was having trouble getting studios to make films on his terms. The only way Paramount Studios would agree to make the picture was if Ford used John Wayne as the main character. They did not care if he was too old for the part, they wanted his name to market the film. Ford did not want Wayne. They were not getting along anymore and Ford knew Wayne was far too old for the part. But Ford had no choice. One reason he chose another older actor, James Stewart, to play Ransom Stoddard, was to avoid having a younger actor playing Ransom to Wayne's Tom Doniphon. But both actors did such a good job with their roles and created such an intense chemistry between them that it is impossible to imagine anyone else playing their parts. Of course, both were also trying to keep up with a thirty-eight-year-old Lee Marvin who brought great intensity to the role of Liberty Valance, (It was the film that made Marvin a star).

Hollywood isn't the only place in the world where actors play much younger characters. This is also a tradition in the kabuki theater of Japan. You will sometimes see a man in his sixties playing "the young hero". It is all about the acting and characterization. After all, all the female parts in kabuki are played by men and it is said among kabuki aficionados that no real woman could possibly play the part of a woman as well as a man because then it would not require "acting"!