

Holy Gunsmoke, It's Matt Dillon and Miss Kitty Back at the Long Branch!



Emotions ran high as James Arness and Amanda Blake—among others—came back to make ‘Gunsmoke: Return to Dodge’

By Bill O'Hallaren

CBS is scheduled to air “Gunsmoke: Return to Dodge” as a TV-movie on Sept. 26 at 8 P.M. (ET). See local listings for time and channel in your area.

It is early morning in a dusty warehouse in Calgary, Alberta, that has been converted to a TV sound stage. A tall man in buckskin and a red-haired woman in a long, bustled green gown linger outside the swinging saloon doors, out of camera range. They hear her cue from

inside, the two embrace tightly, then she walks in. It's supposed to be a quiet entrance but inside, some 40 actors and extras break into spontaneous applause and whistles. Miss Kitty has come back to the Lona Branch

Outside, the tall man, James Arness beams and shakes his head in delight at Amanda Blake's reception. “Doesn't she look incredible?” he whispers to a reporter. Indeed, the 56-year-old Blake does look marvelous, and the 64-year-old Arness appears fit and rugged and every inch a commanding Matt Dillon. Above all, he looks happy.

“I've been with Jim for 15 years,” explains producer John Mantley, “and I've never seen him so excited.” Buck Taylor, who began on *Gunsmoke* 20 years ago as Newly, and now plays the marshal

of Dodge City, reports, "Jim came out grinning the first morning, and it hasn't stopped."

The company doing this TV-movie has been on mountain locations for nearly three weeks, but this is the first morning on the "Gunsmoke" set and the first time the actors have seen the Canadian Dodge City. It's also Blake's first day at work and the first time she's performed with Arness in 13 years. "When I came in this morning I went straight to the Long Branch, alone, and sat down. I didn't know what to expect. But it was so right, so perfect. And then I began to cry. . . ."

A bit later Arness muses, "When Amanda was standing in that doorway, it was suddenly like going back to the 1950s when we started .32 years ago . . . where did it all go?" A long pause, then, "It's a big day here."

The story has Matt, now retired as marshal, living alone as a trapper in the Rockies, his sunset years enlivened by a series of visits from revenge-seeking outlaws. Now Mannon, the most vicious and cunning of them all, has been released from prison, and guess who he intends to gun down? Mannon is played by Steve Forrest, and the story is built around a 1969 episode titled "Mannon", also starring Forrest.

Mounting a new *Gunsmoke* wasn't easy. Mantley explains, "At one point CBS commissioned a script without asking Mr. Arness if he would be interested, or talking to me. They finally got around to that. Our target air date was November of '85 but the first script was something of a disaster. For starters, one of the supporting roles, for a character named Jake Flagg, was better than Dillon's Jim called me and said, 'If you really want me to do this, all right, but I'll have to play Jake Flagg'."

The script problems weren't licked to Mantley's satisfaction until shortly before shooting started, and meantime there was the problem of rounding up those familiar *Gunsmoke* faces. "I called Dennis Weaver's agent and he said Dennis wouldn't be available."

Weaver said, through a spokesman, that there were discussions about his appearing, "but other projects came along and I was unavailable." The other projects included *Buck James*, Weaver's new fall series for ABC.

Mantley remembers Weaver's *Gunsmoke* character, Chester, as "one of the great characters of TV. Dennis won an Emmy for it-Jim and Amanda never won an Emmy-but Dennis just walked away. Actually Dennis left *Gunsmoke* three times and came back twice. After the third time, he was replaced with Festus [Ken Curtis]." Mantley says that when he took over as producer, "Dennis's agent called asking if he could come back as a guest, but I said no." Weaver's spokesman declined to comment on this point.

Curtis would have returned, according to Mantley, except for money. "He wanted twice what Amanda is getting. I said, 'Ken, I can't do that.' He said, 'Then I'm not coming.' And that's how it ended."

One who returned happily is Fran Ryan, the sturdy lady who replaced Blake as proprietress of the Long Branch in *Gunsmoke*'s final year. "There'd always been rumors *Gunsmoke* would be back, but nothing seemed to happen. Then my agent phoned and in a voice half an octave higher than usual said John Mantley is going to call. I started to cry." Ryan, recently seen on CBS's *The Wizard*, explains, "Every actor knows *Gunsmokes* are done with such love and care."

Blake's initial scene in the Long Branch doesn't go well, mainly because her voice keeps choking. Finally Ryan stops the action, wraps a protective arm around her and asks, "What's the matter, honey?" Blake chokes out one word. . . . "Doc." Referring to the late Milburn Stone, who played Doc Adams.

Later in her dressing room, she explains, "Milburn would just be in his glory here. He was not only Doc but our technical adviser. He would straighten us out, even if we didn't need straightening out. I miss him so much."

Mantley "never considered having a new Doc. Milburn gave such a bril- +

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liant performance and we all loved him so deeply that I didn't think we should replace him," The script mentions that there is a new Doc in Dodge City but he is never seen.

Mantley received "ugly phone calls" from people objecting to the show being filmed in Canada, and though he is Canadian born and served in the Royal Canadian Air Force, "no one feels worse about it than I do. But economics drove us here. This *Gunsmoke* is the most expensive two-hour show CBS has ever produced-835 million. We couldn't do it in the States for less than \$4.2-million."

Director Vincent McEveety is "amazed at the quality and professionalism of the Canadian crew, and Calgary is a beautiful place to work, but it's sad we aren't doing it at home."

McEveety directed 35 of the hour-long *Gunsmokes*: a total exceeded by his brother Bernard, who did 38. Buck Taylor recalls, "Vince directed my screen test

for *Gunsmoke* 20 years ago."

Arness, at 6-foot-6, though it seems more, is the tallest man on the set, closely followed by his longtime double and stand-in, Ben Bates. Bates, Mantley notes, barely survived his first day on *Gunsmoke*.

"Jim has this pronounced limp, the result of machine-gun fire riddling his leg at Anzio [in World War II]. It got worse, and when we showed him limping, the audience complained, demanding he be given medical attention. So I decided to use this big fellow Bates to do Jim's walking. I told Ben to practice so from the rear he would look like Jim. After a couple of weeks he said he was ready, the director called for action and Ben started across the street, limping just like Jim. He had got the limp down perfect. I screamed, 'Jeez, Ben, we hired you not to limp!'"

The most pampered member of the cast is Cisco, a shaggy little white dog belonging to camera operator Cyrus Block. Cisco is trained to stay out of the

camera's vision but if trapped will scrunch down and put his paws over his eyes.

Blake, the dedicated animal lover, announces she intends to kidnap Cisco and spirit him back to her new home in Calabasas, near Los Angeles. Her years in Phoenix, where she started her own zoo, ended in divorce, "and now I'm back in La La Land," where she shares her home with "a whole bunch of cats and dogs and birds." She also plans to add llamas. "In time I see hundreds of acres and hundreds of llamas."

She has completely recovered from the mouth cancer she suffered about 11 years ago and has been active in cheering other victims. And she has kept in touch with her *Gunsmoke* pals. "I see Jim about once a year and Dennis and Buck. We keep track of one another."

Arness has lived for years in Brentwood, Cal., and is probably its most reclusive celebrity. He brought his wife and mother-in-law to the Canadian location.

Easing slowly into a director's chair, Arness reflects on the show that made him rich and famous and entertained a couple of generations. "*Gunsmoke* was something whose time had come. What made the difference was they didn't try to do an entertainment fictionalized Western. They really tried like hell to make it hot and dry and dusty, and people were ready for it."

There were feuds between the people who created the original radio *Gunsmoke* and those who brought it to TV, but Arness will have none of that. "The radio version got us off to a great start. The characters were all there for us, honed and tuned by those brilliant writers."

He still doesn't care for roles that call for a suit and tie. "It's more fun to go back a hundred years or so. Believe me, this is better than slamming car doors." Of this TV-movie: "I like it better every day, and every day I feel better about it. But we'll still have to wait and see what the people think." **END**