



The Misfits

THE LAST MOTION PICTURE MADE BY CLARK GABLE AND MARILYN MONROE WAS THIS 1961 ICONIC WESTERN REFLECTING A CHANGING AMERICA AND ITS VIEW OF THE WEST.

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By William C. Reynolds

IN 1974, FILM CRITIC PAULINE Kael wrote, “...the Western is dead.” In subsequent years Hollywood seemed to do its best to prove her right by making fewer and fewer Westerns. During the 1940s and 1950s, movies dealing with the West had focused on celebrating the region as a part of America’s unique history. The West’s place in that lineage was as a platform for expansion, discovery, and opportunity—a place where fortunes could be made as long as one held fast to pioneer spirit and grit, and packed a gun. The movies of the time were not concerned with the resulting issues facing rangelands and those displaced by the forward thrust of an ever-engaging, Eastern-driven social and economic push for wealth and power.

In the 1960s, the first Westerns set in the 20th century were produced. Reflecting the turbulence of the social climate of the ’60s, Westerns became more and more politicized and concerned with the fallout of the rapid urbanization of the West and the effects it had on both people and the land. But the subject most ’60s Western filmmakers seemed to depict loped around the perceived contradiction of the steadfast image of the cowboy trying to hang on in a modern world that seemed to be finished with him and his individualistic approach to life.

Together for the first time—Gable and Monroe—in what was to be the last film each ever made.



ABOVE: A moment of cast clowning, 1960s style, in the Nevada desert—from left, Eli Wallach, Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, and Montgomery Clift. **OPPOSITE:** Magnum photographer Elliott Erwitt had wanted to get the cast together for a “Vogue-like” shot. As he said of the moment, “It just so happened that everyone was available.” From left, producer Frank Taylor, writer Arthur Miller, Eli Wallach, director John Huston, Montgomery Clift, Marilyn Monroe, and Clark Gable.

THESE FILMS INCLUDED SAM PECKINPAH'S *Ride the High Country* with Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott, *Hud* starring Paul Newman, and the original version of *Monte Walsh* with Lee Marvin and Jack Palance (the film was remade in 2003 for television with Tom Selleck reprising Lee Marvin's role). In 1962, actor Kirk Douglas portrayed Jack Burns in the film version of Edward Abbey's novel *Lonely Are the Brave*. Douglas' favorite role, Burns lived in a horseback world that society of the 1960s would just as soon forget about. Shot mostly in and around Albuquerque and the Sandia Mountains, the movie depicts civilization finally catching up with Burns, who is run down by a semi full of plumbing fixtures as he makes a break for the border of Mexico, hoping against hope to find that a frontier still existed.

All these films, good or bad, showed an evolving vision of the West and an aging version of the cowboy—of someone being pushed aside, of a character whose belief in his own capabilities was being tested or even considered obsolete. Brought into question was the cowboy's belief in a code of honor within a lifelong work tied to animals and the land. This was the world in flux for Gay Langland, Clark Gable's character in

Arthur Miller's landmark Western *The Misfits*.

The Misfits premiered on February 1, 1961. Directed by John Huston, it opened less than six months after being shot near Reno, Nevada. The film was notable—and memorable—for a number of reasons. The screenplay was the first from playwright Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*). The fact that Miller got the picture made at all was unusual in an era of studio system productions and signaled the beginning of an era of independent filmmaking. Costing about \$4 million, *The Misfits* was a hugely expensive black-and-white picture for its day. It had a cast of Hollywood legends, including Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe, paired onscreen for the first and only time. It would turn out to be the last film either of them would do. (Gable died before the film premiered, and Monroe died the following year, under what are still considered mysterious circumstances, before she was able to finish another film.) The rest of the cast included such seasoned actors as Montgomery Clift, Eli Wallach, and Thelma Ritter. *The Misfits* was also the first motion picture to use actual wild horses that the characters roped, something that would not be allowed today. The filming was scheduled to last 50 days but ended up taking about four months. Toward the end of the shoot, Marilyn





Although it was her last motion picture, *The Misfits* enabled Marilyn Monroe to prove that she was a great dramatic actress. That achievement was one of writer Arthur Miller's reasons for doing the picture. TOP: Gable, Monroe, and Clift review the climactic horse scene. BOTTOM RIGHT: Gable takes a break with the crew. BOTTOM LEFT: Gable's character Gay Langland to Monroe's Roslyn—"When you smile, it's like the sun coming up,"

Monroe announced her separation from Arthur Miller, her husband of four years. Then the day after filming wrapped, Clark Gable suffered a heart attack, was hospitalized, and died 11 days later, having never seen the completed picture.

THE MISFITS IS A TRUE OLD-STYLE HOLLYWOOD story. The idea first materialized in 1956 when Miller was in Nevada waiting out a divorce from his first wife—at the time, Nevada granted a divorce to anyone in residence there for six weeks or more. Miller had rented a small cabin about 100 miles outside of Reno near Pyramid Lake. During his time there he came across the inspiration for his characters in *The Misfits*—free-spirited desert cowboys making a living catching wild horses and selling them to companies making pet food. Miller saw these individuals and their surroundings as a vehicle for a story about people questioning their lives and the society that they were trying to fit into—or escape from.

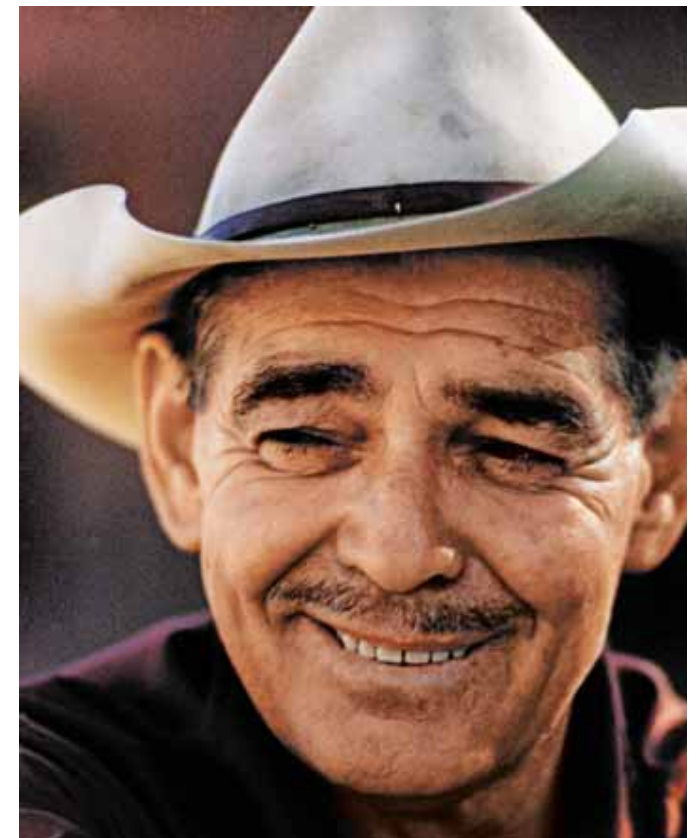
“Just head for that big star straight on. The highway’s underneath it, — it’ll take us right home.”

— CLARK GABLE’S LAST LINE

The story also was a vehicle for Marilyn Monroe. She was the reason Miller was cooling his jets in Nevada. As soon as his divorce was final, he planned to marry Monroe. At the time, Monroe was concerned that her career was not advancing fast enough, and Miller felt that if he could create a significant role for her she could finally achieve what she had always wanted—to be taken as a serious actress.

The premise of what would become *The Misfits* first appeared as a short story in *Esquire* magazine subtitled “Chicken feed: the last frontier of the quixotic cowboy.” The screenplay followed two years later, after the newly married Miller and Monroe had moved into residence in Connecticut. The story, and ultimately the script, depicted the relationships between a group of individuals adrift in a quickly changing world. Gable played an aging cowboy whose life has lost purpose and who is reduced to capturing wild horses—the symbols of the free life he loved—for dog food. Monroe, as Roslyn Taber, is a recent divorcee who has found her way to Reno to escape a failed marriage. Roslyn is sensitive and confused about who she is and where she’s going, and as such reflected many women’s concerns entering the 1960s.

Eli Wallach played Gable’s sidekick, although not in the classic sense of Western sidekicks. No Gabby Hayes, Wallach’s



TOP: Montgomery Clift said of Monroe, “When I look into her eyes, it sparks everything. To another actor, that’s a joy. And it’s rare.” BOTTOM: Arthur Miller said of Gable: *The Misfits* has been Clark Gable’s elegy. He and Gay Langland are now one and the same person; I no longer know where one ends and the other begins.”



Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson said of Monroe, "There is something extremely alert and vivid in her, an intelligence. It's her personality, it's a glance, something very tenuous, very vivid that disappears quickly, that appears again."

character Guido quietly questions Gay Langland's intentions while pretending to be a good friend. Montgomery Clift's Perce Howland is the honest cowboy who finds himself in this complicated crowd. He is a simple, resolute character chasing rodeo dreams. Clift's cowboy persona in *The Misfits* is a long way from the dark and brooding world of his character Matthew Garth opposite John Wayne some 14 years earlier in the Howard Hawks' classic *Red River*.

Monroe saw herself in the character Roslyn Taber and was thus hesitant to take the role. In his book *The Misfits*, documenting the production (co-written with Serge Toubiana), Miller described Monroe's reluctance: "She read parts of the screenplay and laughed delightedly at some of the cowboys' lines, but seemed to withhold full commitment to playing Roslyn," Miller said. Miller felt that Monroe saw Roslyn as a reflection of herself and the pain she suffered in dealing with life. "Her very pain bespoke life and the wrestling with the angel of death. She was a living rebuke to anyone who didn't care," Miller said.

Gable's character, Gay Langland, is a throwback, a cowboy. James Goode, a journalist on the set throughout the filming and author of the authorized book *The Making of the Misfits*, describes director John Huston's view of the film and of men like Langland: "The picture is about people who sell their

work but won't sell themselves. Anybody who holds out is a misfit. If he loses, he is a failure, and if he is successful, he is rare. This movie is about a world in change. There was meaning in our lives before World War II, but we have lost meaning now. Now the cowboys ride pickup trucks and a rodeo rider is an actor of sorts. Once they sold wild horses for children's ponies. And now for dog food. This has become a dog-eat-horse society. The part of Gay Langland is a point that should be underscored now, not as a preachment. It reveals itself dramatically.

He is the same man, but the world had changed. Then he was noble, now he is ignoble. Ultimately Gay Langland is the modern hero or about as close to one as I have read about. He has faced the responsibilities of manhood."

Clark Gable had been in nearly 80 movies by the time he played Langland. "Gay is a misfit because he hasn't quite kept up with the world," he said.

Gable, Miller, and Huston all agreed that Langland himself was the statement of the picture. He was the common denominator in an era of social change and coming unrest: the holdout realizing the need for personal dignity in a society bent on destroying individuality. In the end Miller could not see where Clark Gable ended and Gay Langland began. "He and Gay Langland are one and the same," he said. "Clark is a hero in the



ABOVE: Monroe at the gaming tables. RIGHT: Gable on location in his silver Mercedes Gullwing Coupe.

mythical sense of the word as well as being real." For Miller, Gable became Langland just as Monroe became Roslyn.

The film is as much a reflection of America's mid-20th-century growing pains as it was of the principal actors. The ultimate battle Gay Langland faces is not with the horses but with himself. He sees the futility of his actions during the final battle with the stallion, which he cuts loose after defeating, accepting in some small way that dignity could still be held on to and that hope belonged to all.

The final scene of the film, No. 269, was shot on November 4, 1960, on Paramount's Stage 2. Gay Langland sits next to Roslyn in a pick-up truck, driving toward a new start together—the cowboy way, giving it one more try. Their dialogue closes the film:

ROSLYN: *How do you find your way back in the dark?*

LANGLAND: *Just head for that big star straight on. The highway's under it — it'll take us right home.*

If there is any truth to the words of critic Pauline Kael, written 13 years after the release of *The Misfits*—that the "Western is dead"—Arthur Miller's creation along with time and reflection may allow us some liberty with her statement. The Western isn't dead, far from it; it just isn't the same anymore.

