

The Ballad of Little Jo

USA | 1993 | 121 minutes

Credits

Director	Maggie Greenwald
Screenplay	Maggie Greenwald
Photography	Declan Quinn
Music	David Mansfield

Cast

Josephine 'Jo' Monaghan	Suzy Amis
Frank Badger	Bo Hopkins
Percy Corcoran	Ian McKellen
Tinman Wong	David Chung

In Brief

The Western has taken many forms, from singing cowboys to Italian epics. But *The Ballad of Little Jo* is the first gender-bender, feminist horse opera. If nothing else, director Maggie Greenwald has scored a footnote in the history book.

She's done much more than that, though. *The Ballad of Little Jo* was inspired by a real woman, Josephine Monaghan, a cowboy whose gender wasn't discovered until after her death. Much of the film attempts to recreate the harsh realities of life in the West that explain why a woman would find it preferable to pose as a man.



A 19th-century frontiersperson takes the adage "Go west, young man" quite literally in *The Ballad of Little Jo*, a gritty herstory about a tough little tootsie in a ten-gallon hat. A feminist western from fringe filmmaker Maggie Greenwald, this intriguing if rough-hewn drama is as ruthless in its revisionism as *Unforgiven*. Like Clint Eastwood's film, it dismantles the frontier mythos, albeit with a heavy heart and an even heavier hand.

Greenwald, whose 1989 film *The Kill Off* made the festival rounds, both wrote and directed this harrowing yarn, which is drawn from what little is known of Josephine "Little Jo" Monaghan, a woman whose manly ruse was discovered only after her death. Inspired by period portraiture and other, better-documented cases of transvestism, Greenwald has created an altogether remarkable, if sour, western heroine.

Monaghan -- played unconvincingly by Suzy Amis of *Rich in Love* -- is a genteel Bostonian whose misadventures on the trail transform her into Little Jo, a squeaky-sounding adolescent boy who becomes a sheep rancher in 1880s Montana. The disguise not only protects her from the local lunkheads but also frees her from the familiar role of wife, whore or teacher.

The film begins with deceptive lyricism on the open road. A slight strawberry blonde with a silk parasol walks through the dusty wake of a horse-drawn cart and a crescendo of fiddle music. Most folks pass her by, and then a jaunty peddler (Rene Auberjonois) stops and offers her a ride.

However, it's not kindness but profit that motivates him, as she discovers when he sells her to a pair of hooligans. After narrowly escaping the would-be rapists, she replaces her torn dress and petticoats with outsize breeches and a coarse cotton shirt, ignoring the warning of the store's grumpy proprietor: "It's agin' the law to dress improper to your sex."

Josephine weeps as she cuts her hair and thinks back on the consequences that set her on this path: A scarlet debutante, she was banished after bearing an illegitimate son, whom she left behind in her sister's care. With her bright hair in a boyish cut, Jo suddenly goes Rambo on us and slashes open her cheek with a straight razor. Is this ritual scarification some type of penance or merely an attempt to make her transformation more convincing?

In any case, Little Jo is now uniquely suited to play the fly on the bunkhouse wall, to thoroughly investigate the wonderful world of testosterone. The character's purpose isn't to walk a mile in the boys' stinky boots but to muddy their gallant legend. This brings her to Ruby City, a scrappy mining town populated by skunks, bullies, racists and homophobes.

It's not a surprising look at western low life, but a tediously one-dimensional one. Without exception, every white man Jo gets to know proves one step below a horny toad on the evolutionary scale. Sir Ian McKellen is among the most reprehensible as an assayer whose amusing disdain for marriage becomes pathological misogyny when he drinks. Little Jo, who has been bunking at his place, is obliged to stop him from killing a mute prostitute whom he has already beaten and maimed. Jo's explosively violent neighbor, Frank (Bo Hopkins), is the best of this wild bunch, probably because Hopkins brings some welcome swagger and humor to these inert proceedings.

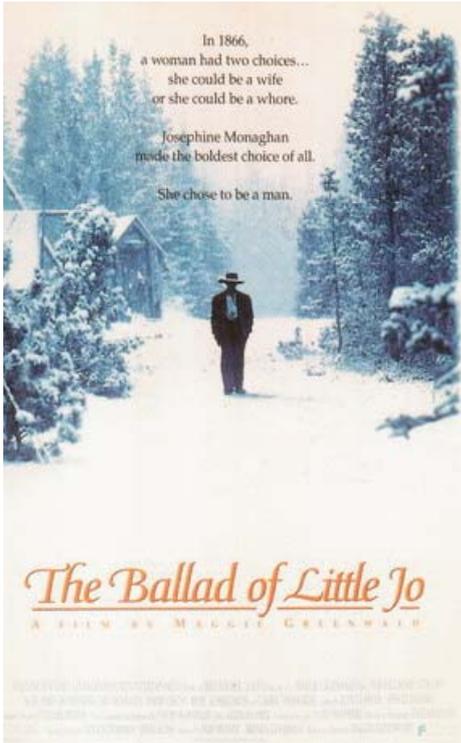
The film's one decent male character is Tinman (genial David Chung), a hunky Chinese drifter who becomes Jo's housekeeper after she rescues him from a lynch mob. Doesn't this sound fun? A shirtless Tinman bathes seductively in the creek beside her cabin, and all Jo's pent-up longings surface at the sight of this little bit of dim sum.

Tinman quickly discovers her secret -- maybe he notices her salivating or maybe it's just that he's a sensitive man of color. Whichever, they are soon contentedly making love and puffing opium under her wolf pelt comforter.

Happiness is Jo's at last, when dangled if the evil Eastern capitalists don't arrive and demand to buy her sheep ranch. A distaff variation on Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* -- or would be Mr. Miller? -- comes to mind at this turn of events. Jo, a peaceable sort, is

Petticoats or Pistols: Women in the Western

The Ballad of Little Jo



obliged to take up a gun to protect Tinman and the homestead -- just like Clint Eastwood.

Yep, it's a traditional portrait of rugged individualism, but Greenwald's film does debunk Hollywood's Old West, should anybody out there still be harboring any illusions of happy bawds and howdy, ma'ams. Still, Jo herself turns into a dour sort and a man killer. In the end, she's not so different from the slashed whore in "Unforgiven." Liberated or not, she still spends her entire life scarred by the violence of men.

Rita Kempley - Washington Post

Our Heroes Have Sometimes been Cowgirls

When a woman film-maker stakes acclaim to genres like the Western does she betray feminism by adopting male stories and male myths? When a woman makes a Western about a cross-dressing female hero, should we read it as an allegory of the female director in Hollywood? Does female success in the world of popular entertainment mean that a woman's gotta do what a man's gotta do?

In the early years of feminist film theory, writers such as Claire Johnston urged feminist film-makers not to abandon the formulas of the entertainment film which have given so much pleasure to women, but rather to work at transforming them. Many feminist critics began to study women's genres like Hollywood maternal melodramas and television soap operas in order to examine how women's fantasies have been shaped and how feminists might begin to reshape them. Although the fantasies of many women have

surely been influenced by male genres too, we didn't really think much back then about how women might appropriate these genres. At the time, such an appropriation might have struck many of us as an affirmation of the very values and storytelling traditions we wanted to subvert.

In those days female "transvestism"-a term we used figuratively to designate an identification with the opposite sex-was often held to be a sorry condition; in fact it became a major metaphor for the tragic plight of the female spectator, who because she was forced to project herself onto a male hero was thought to be unable to "achieve a stable sexual identity," as Laura Mulvey put it in her analysis of *Duel in the Sun*. Recently, however, transvestism has taken on a more positive meaning, and the idea that one should strive to achieve "a stable sexual identity" has increasingly come to be seen as retrograde and severely limiting. Marking this shift in attitude is Maggie Greenwald's 1993 Western, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, a landmark in the history of women's cinema and a major artistic achievement by almost any standard. Partly about the pleasure and freedom enjoyed by a woman who crossdresses as a man, the film invites us to rethink the position of woman in and at the movies, as well as that of the woman behind the camera.

Greenwald is among the most talented of a new breed of women directors emerging today who refuse to remain confined to their traditional spheres in the realm of fantasy, but range freely across both male and female territory, transforming the land they roam.

The Ballad of Little Jo-the first Western written and directed by a woman since the silent era-stars Suzy Amis, who gives a stunningly subtle performance as a young Eastern society woman cast out by her family when she has a child out of wedlock. Initially frail and vulnerable, Josephine Monaghan comes out West, adopts male dress, and becomes Little Jo Monaghan, a self-sufficient sheep farmer who successfully fights off the brutal Western Cattle Company when it attempts to force the sheep farmers off their land.

The film retains what feminist critic Annette Kolodny has seen as the hallmark of female fantasies of the landscape: a sense of intimacy with the land and its creatures. At the same time, with its breathtaking cinematography, it assumes the traditionally masculine prerogative of glorying in the sublimity and solitude of the West. *Ballad* is not Greenwald's first incursion into male worlds. *The Kill-Off* (1989), Greenwald's second film (after *Home Remedy* in 1987, which the director describes as "a black-comedy

about an anti-yuppie's crisis in a yuppie world"), is to my mind the most successful and interesting adaptation of the work of the noir novelist Jim Thompson. Greenwald is relentless in exploring the seediness of Thompson's settings and his characters' moral and psychological degradation. Yet "transvestism" in the case of the Greenwald-Thompson interaction works both ways: in adapting the book, Greenwald faithfully adhered to the male writer's vision, but at the same time, she actually detected and elicited a "feminine" current in the work of a writer whom many would consider the ultimate hard-boiled novelist. Unfortunately, *The Kill-Off* remains unavailable here, having barely opened in this country; in contrast, when it was released abroad in 1990, it created a great stir-at Cannes as well as other festivals (including the Torino Film Festival, where it won the Best Director Award).

Tania Modleski

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