

# Rancho Notorious

USA | 1952 | 89 minutes

## Credits

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|--------------------|--|
| <b>Director</b>    | Fritz Lang                                 |
| <b>Screenplay</b>  | Daniel Taradash<br>Silvia Richards (story) |
| <b>Photography</b> | Hal Mohr                                   |
| <b>Music</b>       | Ken Darby<br>Emil Newman                   |

## Cast

|                         |                  |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Altar Keane</b>      | Marlene Dietrich |
| <b>Vern Haskell</b>     | Arthur Kennedy   |
| <b>Frenchy Fairmont</b> | Mel Ferrer       |
| <b>Beth Forbes</b>      | Gloria Henry     |

## In Brief

Pauline Kael predicted that this 1952 effort would not be among the films Fritz Lang would be remembered for. Fortunately, she was wrong. At first glance it seems like a silly, stagy Western, but Lang managed to use the film's shortcomings to his advantage. Vern (Arthur Kennedy) is bent on finding the man who killed his beloved fiancée. He spends years searching and following leads, and one name keeps coming up: Altar Keane (Marlene Dietrich). A former showgirl, Keane now runs a ranch called the Chuck-a-Luck that specializes in hiding wanted outlaws. Vern helps break Altar's beau Frenchy (Mel Ferrer) out of jail, and Frenchy leads Vern straight to the ranch. But has Vern found the right man? *Rancho Notorious* is unique for its noticeable lack of sprawling landscapes and sweeping movements. Because the small budget kept Lang sequestered on the studio lot, he found a way to use the sets for their claustrophobic, caged feel. The revenge-lust thread plays through the entire film and never lets up, and the garish colors and lighting seem to emphasize this. It's a superb achievement, and it led to two more similar Freudian masterworks, Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and Samuel Fuller's *Forty Guns* (1957). According to some sources, Lang and Dietrich had an affair during production, but were no longer speaking by the time the film wrapped. Howard Hughes produced. Co-star George Reeves went on to play "Superman" on TV.

A fascinating Western noir, Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* is propelled by a recurring ballad of "hate, murder and revenge." The images seem to elaborate on the song, "Legend of Chuck-A-Luck." Therefore, the song (with music and lyrics by Ken Darby) seems to attribute the film to a legendary domain, pointedly distancing us the viewer from the unfolding drama. This deepens the distancing achieved by the remoteness of the Western setting sometime in the 1870s and the use of color. (The cinematographer is Hal Mohr, whose specialty is dreaminess: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1935; *Phantom of the Opera*, 1943.) Flamboyant yet elusive, convoluted in the machinations of its meanest characters yet as persistent as a train going down a track, Lang's third and final Western—the other two are *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union* (1941)—altogether seems a dream existing in a dream.



Along with *You Only Live Once* (1937) and *Clash by Night* (1952), it is Lang's finest American film.

Even the meaningless title, imposed over Lang's objections by RKO studio head Howard Hughes, fits the material perfectly. (Lang had wanted the film to be called *Chuck-A-Luck*.)

What sets the narrative wheel in motion is the rape and murder of Beth, a girl alone at the counter one day in her father's general store in a small Wyoming town. Set to marry her in eight days, cowboy Vern Haskell is left with a gaping hole in his psyche, which instantly is filled with hatred for the anonymous wrongdoer and a determination to exact revenge. Michael E. Grost, an Internet film critic, thus finds the film to be "deeply feminist, in taking with great seriousness the horrible crime of rape." This is certainly possible, so long as we admit that Vern's course of action divorces him from a feminist impulse. Vern's pursuit of "justice" objectifies the victim all over again, consigning her memory to the status of mere touchstone for his vicious, oppressive rage, and implying that the crime committed is one of a violation of his property rights. By extension, one may infer—although, of course, he himself would be incapable of such a formulation—that Vern felt only he, as her husband had she lived, was entitled to rape Beth. There is a sourness to the tone of all this psychosocial complication that, while not excluding the possibility of frustrated feminism on Lang's part, suggests that other meanings may be more central. Indeed, the film's Langian sense of determinism all but requires the rape and murder of Beth—hardly a felicitous springboard for feminist inquiry. In addition, at some point the pun contained in Vern's last name, Haskell, likely kicks in: has kill, as in has to kill, may imply that Beth's fate is mere pretext—rationalization—for Vern's murderous impulses and vengeful mission, making the death of his beloved, in fact, a matter of convenience for him. Perhaps her end spares Vern the forfeit of his idealization of Beth; this cancellation of their wedding spares him the ordeal of embracing the reality of her with which marriage would have confronted him. Vern has been left with an image of Beth that he hopes to hold onto—and an image of himself, as her avenger, that may tighten the psychic grip necessary to accomplish the task.

Underscoring the theme of possessiveness is the glittering brooch that Vern pins on Beth at their last meeting and which her killer confiscates as a memento of the rape. In effect, Vern is after this prize to reclaim it as his own. This all but identifies Vern with Beth's (as yet) unknown rapist and killer. Certainly Vern's quest fails to characterize him as any sort of shining knight, for as the ballad tells us, " . . .

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deep within him burn the fires of hate, murder and revenge.”

Different viewers will interpret Vern’s tenderness toward Beth differently. Some may take it at face value. But, for me, what is so startling about that opening scene between the two on the threshold of their wedding is its unreality, its adolescent nature. It’s a purely conventional moment between young lovebirds that’s undercut by a curious remark Vern makes. When giving Beth the brooch, Vern boasts that the person who sold it to him said the brooch came all the way from Paris. Later, this ridiculous comment will connect the brooch to the world of an outlaw and gunslinger named Fairmont, who goes by the nickname Frenchy. Initially, though, it strikes us as juvenile that Vern seems to be unaware he has been the victim of a merchant’s puffery; he seems to believe that the piece of jewelry crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the U.S. just to flatter his ego as gift-giver and to adorn his soon-to-be-bride. This is a presumably grown man speaking, but his impossible innocence here reflects on the impossible purity and innocence to which he has mentally consigned Beth. It is he who has thus made her, at least symbolically, ripe for rape.

Of course, the exchanges between Beth and Vern are no less realistic for being giddily foolish. It is often the case that in wooing a girl, after all, a man is after a prize that marriage will suddenly convert into a flesh-and-blood woman—one who cannot help but contest the ego that her succumbing to his wooing previously nurtured and stroked. Weddings consummate the wooing; marriage is another matter entirely. The fact that *Rancho Notorious* is prevented from ever reaching Vern and Beth’s wedding, let alone their nuts-and-bolts, two-human marriage, is one of the film’s dream, even fairy-tale, elements. One is reminded here of *Much Ado About Nothing*, whose merry romp stops short of Beatrice and Benedick’s wedding, sparing them (and us) the undoing of their love that marriage, according to Shakespeare, would likely have brought about. In tune with this idea, at the other end, is Ingmar Bergman’s film *Scenes from a Marriage* (1974), which shows a couple who become friendly, finally, after divorce, after marriage.

Whatever its nature, Vern’s quest involves the unravelling of a mystery: Who assaulted and murdered Beth? If, as I have suggested, in some sense (out of Sophocles’s *Œdipus Rex*) the answer to this is “the quester, or detective, himself,” then a significant motivation on Vern’s part is to deny this truth by pinning the rap on somebody else. Like *Œdipus* and *Hamlet*,\* Vern Haskell looks outside himself to keep looking too closely or carefully within. In part, the fatalism of the film derives from the fact that, afflicted with a lack of self-knowledge, Vern cannot help but do this. All the while he is searching for the solution of the mystery at hand, he is venturing deeper and deeper into fantastic territory that removes him more and more from the truth about Beth’s death, their planned wedding, and himself. Unlike *Œdipus*, Vern—and Lang’s film along with him—will remain embedded in a dream. Vern will never face the truth because something in the American experience denies him tragic dimension and renders him, instead, cheap, evasive and dishonest. In many ways, *Rancho Notorious* is, thematically, the mirror-opposite of, four years hence, John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), which also centers on a quest, but one that is tragic regarding its quester, Ethan Edwards, and the America he represents—a film in which self-discovery and self-awareness are results of his quest.

From an old man, the partner whom the rapist-killer (the projection of Vern’s denial of responsibility) has shot in the back, Vern gets this clue as the man expires: “Chuck-A-Luck.” This is the film’s *Rosebud*, *Grost* notes; if only Vern can find out what Chuck-A-Luck means, he will learn, he believes, everything. Of course, chuck-a-luck is a gambling game involving a wheel of fortune and bets placed on color-coded numbers on a board. The game was popular in the Southwest, into which Vern rides ever deeper and deeper in search of his solution. Instinctively, however, he knows that the dying man’s utterance refers to something other than the game, to a place, perhaps, where he will learn the identity of Beth’s assailant. It is worth noting that the game chuck-a-luck derives from the French roulette. Vern’s trail is littered with things French.

As Vern questions people along the way, he encounters a series of recollections and accounts that come to us as dreamlike, exaggerated, borderline surreal flashbacks—dreams within the housing dream of the quest. They involve a fabulous woman of mystery, the powerfully alluring and unforgettable Altar Keane, who has seemingly dropped off the face of the earth. Keane, which sounds like Kane, as in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), tweaks us a bit, given that Chuck-A-Luck has already asserted itself as a facsimile of *Rosebud* from that film. It turns out that, years earlier, with Frenchy Fairmont’s help, Altar Keane, a saloon singer, right after being fired, made her fortune at the chuck-a-luck table in the saloon and has since retreated to her (relatively) palatial domain, a horse ranch which hills hide in its valley, and which is also called Chuck-A-Luck. Vern gains his entrance to this world-within-the-world by befriending Frenchy Fairmont, an outlaw, “the fastest gun in the West,” and Altar’s longtime lover, and by helping him escape jail. Vern’s first distant view of Chuck-A-Luck, on horseback from on high, identifies it as a dreamlike vision—as glittering as the brooch that will reappear there, worn by Altar. The place is a dream within a dream.

Indeed, the film questions its own reality, shifting its images to dreams. I noted the flashbacks that are conjured for us by people’s recollections or accounts of Altar Keane. Are the images in these real? Dreams? How much is accurately remembered, how much exaggerated, how much wishfully invented? (In a deputy sheriff’s account, for instance, Altar is lasciviously riding him, as if he were a horse,

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in a saloon race, in which she is wearing a fall, a golden faux-pony tail that rounds out an impossible portrait conjoining corruption and innocence.) Daniel Taradash's splendid script (from a story by Silvia Richards) pokes at us with these possibilities as some of those invoking Keane make comments such as these: "I don't swear this is true, because I wasn't here. But this is how they tell it." "I was told a story . . . If you want to believe what you hear . . . I don't know if it's true, but . . ." Those familiar with the rhetorical strategies of the trickster narrator in *Billy Budd* will recognize American author Herman Melville's method for throwing into question military officialdom and its pronouncements, as well as the instant history, the so-called truth, promoted by newspaper accounts.\*\* But Lang's aim in *Rancho Notorious* is somewhat different. Lang is questioning the reality, as well as the morality, of the rags-to-riches American experience that Altar Keane represents. Keane got her gains through Frenchy's cheating intervention and she has used the money to build her own Chuck-A-Luck, a hideout for thieves 10% of whose stolen acquisitions she appropriates. The façade of American capitalism, that wealth is won by honest work, is a dream, according to Lang's film; the sordid reality lies underneath.

The night she met Frenchy Fairmont at Baldy's Palace, Altar, according to the flashback, was dressed in red and black. A wall painting is an abstract design consisting of red, white and black. The chuck-a-luck wheel is red, white and black. Moreover, when first we see Frenchy in his jail cell, he is dressed in these colors, and the same colors, in a more subdued incarnation, dominate Altar's residence and place of operations, Chuck-A-Luck. Without doubt, this color scheme is a parody of the red, white and blue of the American flag, but the virulence of Lang's parody fully kicks in only when we recall that red, white and black were also the colors of the Nazi flag, which was adorned by a swastika instead of a brooch. Half-Jewish, Lang fled Nazi Germany once Hitler came to power. Interestingly, his first stop on his eventual journey to the United States was France, the nation that produced Stendhal's (*Marie-*

Henri Beyle's) novel *Le rouge et le noir*, in which the color red is identified with the military and black is identified with the Church. I don't know quite what to make of all this, but it's interesting, in this context, that Keane's Christian name is Altar. In another context, she is so named because she is a constant reminder to Vern of the wedding that did not take place owing to Beth's brutal death.

Lang's cinema had always been fatalistic; in light of the Holocaust, it could scarcely become less so. The nightmare of Nazism haunts *Rancho Notorious* as Lang addresses, and attacks, the dangerous nature of idealistic national myths, whether they are promoted in Germany or the United States. Vern's lack of self-knowledge is an index of the delusions that such myths generate, and his grimly hilarious series of wrong assumptions as to who killed Beth from among the suspects at Chuck-A-Luck underscores his incapacity for self-criticism. Like the Nazis, this film implies, McCarthyite America pins its problems on "the Other." The Nazis had their Jews to scapegoat; the Americans, their communists. (Actually, the Nazis also scapegoated communists.) In the latter case, the film further implies, the scapegoating is a distraction from America's delusional foundation in myths about enterprise and financial success. Chuck-A-Luck, a parody of the American Dream, represents the nightmare of capitalism, which entraps human lives in a circle of luck and unfair competition, with its hidden or denied elements of advantage and disadvantage, and which promotes itself as providing fair, open opportunity. One shot is trenchant in this regard: Altar Keane, dressed in lavender, riding triumphantly in an open carriage, her black maid, dressed in black, sitting right behind her, shielding her from the sun with a black parasol.

Arthur Kennedy is good as Vern, who betrays his friendship with Frenchy by becoming Altar's lover, Mel Ferrer is (for a change) excellent as Frenchy, whose reputation as a fast gun, it turns out, exceeds his actual skill, and Marlene Dietrich, who had had a brief affair with Lang a lifetime earlier, is brilliant as Altar Keane, whose land, Vern roughly points out to her, is a graveyard. The film implies, I am afraid, we Americans are all buried there.

\* See my Hamlet essay, "The King's Caught Conscience," *Ball State University Forum*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Spring 1978), 3-11.

\*\* See my essay "Preinterpretation and *Billy Budd*," *Essays in Literature*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 1986), 103-113.

Dennis Grunes

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