

HOMBRE
(1966, 111 Minutes)

When crime novelist Elmore Leonard died in 2013, he was lionized as one of the best representatives of that literary genre. His more than forty crime novels were populated by morally ambivalent characters, black humor and acute descriptions of human nature. His first real success came with the novel **Glitz**, a story of vengeance set in Atlantic City, in 1985 at age 60. One of his most popular novels, **Get Shorty**, became an acclaimed film starring John Travolta in 1995. Yet earlier in his career, while working as a copywriter for General Motors in Detroit, Leonard created a series of taut, soundly constructed Western novels, a number of which were developed into several films (*The Tall T*, *3:10 to Yuma*, *Hombre*, and *Valdez is Coming*) in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and focused on the darker side of Western expansion. They were set in Arizona and featured prominent roles for Native Americans (especially the Apache) and Hispanics. The film protagonists tended to be loners, stubborn, quietly competent people who were often underestimated, misjudged or taken for granted – perhaps a portrait of the author as a young man.

Hombre, which featured Paul Newman, was among the most successful of the Leonard inspired films. Produced and directed by Martin Ritt, *Hombre* delivered a powerful yet understated message about the mistreatment of Native Americans in the Southwest. Newman portrays the cynical yet noble anti-hero John Russell, a white man raised among Native Americans on a reservation. He fears and hates what he sees in white “civilization.” Yet he is forced to confront the white society he despises when he sells a boarding house bequeathed by his father and leaves town by stagecoach with a group of bigoted passengers who believe he is a Native

American. Assigned second class status on the stagecoach, Russell breaks out of his self-imposed isolation and rescues his traveling companions from bandits through his deep survival skills, quiet confidence and ultimate compassion for others. Unlike characters in many other Westerns, the supporting cast of adversaries and companions in *Hombre* come across as multi-faceted, flawed real people who must adapt to changing and difficult circumstances. The film was shot in Death Valley and reflects the gritty, demanding environment of that locale.