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'True Grit' memories from Kim Darby and Glen Campbell

The actors recall working on the original film with John Wayne.

January 04, 2011 | By Susan King, Los Angeles Times

Most remakes of classic films are shadows of the originals. But Joel and Ethan Coen's version of the western "True Grit" — with Jeff Bridges as Rooster Cogburn, newcomer Hailee Steinfeld as the plucky Mattie Ross and Matt Damon as Texas Ranger LaBoeuf — has won over critics, audiences and even Kim Darby, who played the resolute Mattie in the 1969 original for which John Wayne won his only Oscar as the irascible Cogburn.

"It's a wonderful movie," said Darby, now 63. "It's top drawer." And so, she said, is Steinfeld.

"She's just extraordinary in the film," Darby said. "I said to her agent, 'Be sure you're careful what she does next. The next thing is what is so important.'" (Darby's post "Grit" movies — including 1969's "Generation" and 1970's "Norwood" — didn't exactly set the box office on fire.)

Darby was especially impressed with Steinfeld's skills on horseback, including riding her black pony across a river. "God bless her that she did the whole thing," said Darby, who admitted she probably was on a horse for only five minutes in the original.

"I am really afraid of horses," she said. "I had a stunt double. She was about 65. They made a mask of my face out of clay and she would wear that and it would match my profile."

Most of the major players from the original — including Wayne, Dennis Hopper, Jeff Corey and director Henry Hathaway — have died. But a few in addition to Darby are still around, including Robert Duvall (who played the outlaw gang leader "Lucky" Ned Pepper) and singing star Glen Campbell (who made his film debut as LaBoeuf).

For the 1969 "True Grit," which like the 2010 film was adapted from Charles Portis' novel, producer Hal Wallis originally wanted Mia Farrow to play Mattie. But she supposedly turned it down because her "Secret Ceremony" costar Robert Mitchum warned her that Hathaway was a difficult director to work with.

Wallis then saw Darby on an episode of the TV drama "Run for Your Life" in which she played an unwed mother and thought she had the pluck and vulnerability for the Mattie character.

Though Steinfeld was just 13 when she played the role of 14-year-old Mattie in the new version, Darby was 21 and the mother of a newborn daughter, Heather, with her first husband, actor James Stacy. During the filming of the movie, she began divorce proceedings against Stacy.

"The first 10 days of the movie I would love to do over again," said Darby, who lives in Studio City and has had some minor roles in recent years but has primarily focused on teaching acting over the last two decades. "I think I was more concentrated on my child because she was such an infant."

She fondly recalls working with Wayne. "He was there on the set before anyone else and knew every line perfectly," Darby said.

After the production finished filming, Darby remembered, there was a photo shoot at Paramount Pictures with the stars who were working at the studio at the time, "which were John Wayne, Barbra Streisand, Clint Eastwood, Goldie Hawn.... Robert Evans was in the middle. I was sitting on the curb a ways away watching. The Duke stepped out of the picture and he said, 'Hey, kid.' He put out his arms and lifted me up and brought me over and put me in the center of the picture. How wonderful is that?"

She did, though, have a bit of a problem with Hathaway, who was 71 when he directed the film.

"He was an old prop man and he usually focused on the prop man and he would just yell at him no matter what he did," Darby said. Although they had gotten along well when she first met him at the studio, Hathaway yelled at her on the first day of shooting. "It got me so off guard," she said. "I just got up and went back to my dressing room."

Eventually, the two had a heart-to-heart talk in the dressing room. "I said, 'Henry, I'll do anything you want, just don't yell at me again.' After that day, we went along swimmingly."

Campbell, now 74 and living in Malibu, said he also ran into problems with Hathaway. After being yelled at one day, Campbell recalled that he told the director, "You know, I can get on a horse and get out of here and get in my car and go back to L.A.' He kind of looked at me and said, 'Well, I have been tough on you.' That was Henry Hathaway."

By the late 1960s, Campbell was a popular recording artist with his hits like "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and was the star of his own CBS variety show, "The

Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour." But he had never acted before "True Grit."

"I never thought about being an actor because I am a singer and a guitar player," said Campbell, who has yet to see the new version.

But he was thrilled working with the Duke, he said, because he had been a fan of the actor since he was a kid growing up in Delight, Ark. "It was just amazing," Campbell recalled. "He was so much like my dad. He was a very nice guy."

Campbell, who still performs, made only one other feature, 1970's disastrous "Norwood" with Darby. "I enjoyed doing movies; I just wasn't an actor, so to speak," he said. But he joked that he nonetheless did a "good deed" in "True Grit."

"I made John Wayne look so good in a movie," Campbell said, "that he won his only Oscar."

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