

## John Ford and *Stagecoach*: Facts and Trivia

Director John Ford won six Academy Awards (for *The Informer*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *How Green was My Valley*, *The Quiet Man*, and two wartime documentaries), won four New York Film Critics Awards, and won the American Film Institute's first Life Achievement Award.

*Stagecoach* won Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor and for Music/Scoring; it was nominated for five more—Best Art Direction, Best Cinematography, Best Director, Best Film Editing, and Best Picture.

In a career that spanned more than fifty years, he made 136 movies, 54 of them Westerns. None of his Academy Awards as a director were for a Western.

Asked why, in the climactic chase scene of *Stagecoach*, the Indians didn't simply shoot the horses to stop the stagecoach, Ford replied, "Because that would have been the end of the movie."

*Stagecoach* was the first of the 9 films that John Ford filmed in Monument Valley: *My Darling Clementine*, *Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Wagon Master*, *Rio Grande*, *The Searchers*, *Sergeant Rutledge*, and his last Western, *Cheyenne Autumn*.

*Stagecoach* is the first of many collaborations between John Ford and John Wayne. When the film was being cast, John Ford lobbied hard for John Wayne, but producer Walter Wanger kept saying no. It was only after constant persistence on Ford's part that Wanger finally gave in. Wanger's reservations were based on Wayne's string of B-movies, in which he came across as being a less than competent actor, and the box office failure of Raoul Walsh's *The Big Trail* in 1930, Wayne's first serious starring role.

John Ford loved the Monument Valley location so much that the actual stagecoach journey traverses the valley three times. In 1939 there was no paved road through Monument Valley, which is why it hadn't been used as a movie location before (it wasn't paved until the 1950s). Harry Goulding, who ran a trading post there, had heard that John Ford was planning a big-budget Western so he traveled to Hollywood, armed with over 100 photographs; he threatened to camp out on Ford's doorstep until the director saw him. Ford saw him and was sold on the location, particularly when he realized that its remoteness would free him from studio interference.

The interior sets all have ceilings, an unusual practice at the time for studio filming. This was to create a claustrophobic effect in complete counterpoint to the wide open expanse of Monument Valley.

*Stagecoach* was John Ford's first sound Western and his first in that genre in 13 years. Westerns had fallen out of favor with the coming of sound, as it was tricky to record on location.

Local Navajo Indians played the Apaches, with one exception; Geronimo was played by an Apache. The film's production was a huge economic boost to the local impoverished population, giving jobs to hundreds of locals as extras and handymen. Hosteen Tso, a local shaman, promised John Ford the exact kind of cloud formations he wanted. They duly appeared.

In 1939 Claire Trevor was the film's biggest star and thus commanded the highest salary. John Wayne's salary was considerably less than all of his co-stars', apart from John Carradine's.

Orson Welles privately watched this film about 40 times while he was making *Citizen Kane*. Another great director influenced by Ford was Akira Kurosawa.

Near the end of the movie, Luke Plummer (Tom Tyler) has a pair of black aces and a pair of black eights. This is the "dead man's hand" supposed to have been held by Wild Bill Hickok before he was killed.

A device known as a "Running W" is used on the Indians' horses during the sequence where they are chasing the stagecoach. Strong, thin wires are fixed to a metal post, then the other end of the wires are attached to an iron clamp that encircles the legs of a horse, and the post is anchored into the ground. The horse is then ridden at full gallop, and when the wire's maximum length is reached - just when the rider is "shot" - the animal's legs are jerked out from underneath it, causing it to tumble violently and throw the "shot" rider off. The trouble is that the rider knows when the horse is going to fall but the horse doesn't, resulting in many horses either being killed outright or having to be destroyed because of broken limbs incurred during the falls. The use of the "Running W" was eventually discontinued after many complaints from both inside and outside the film industry.

It's believed by many that the famous line "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," widely attributed to a John Wayne Western character, is spoken by Wayne in this film; however, it isn't. His character, The Ringo Kid, instead says "There are some things a man just can't run away from," when asked why he intends to stay and avenge his family's murders rather than try to escape to Mexico.

Although Louis Gruenberg received screen credit for the musical score, his contribution was not used and his name was omitted for the Academy Award nomination.

The hat that John Wayne wears is his own. He wore it in many westerns during the next two decades before retiring it after Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo*, because it was simply "falling apart." After that, the hat was displayed under glass in his home.

*Stagecoach* is ranked #9 on the American Film Institute's list of the 10 greatest films in the genre "Western" in June 2008.

*Stagecoach* is pictured on one of four 25¢ US commemorative postage stamps issued 23 March 1990 honoring classic films released in 1939. The other stamps featured *Beau Geste*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Gone with the Wind*.

Doctor Boone's misquote, 'Is this the face that wrecked a thousand ships/ And burned the towerless tops of Ilium?,' is from *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, Scene xiv. Doc Boone says "wrecked," not "launched," as in Marlowe's play.

Ford directed 10 different actors in Oscar-nominated performances: Victor McLaglen, Thomas Mitchell, Edna May Oliver, Jane Darwell, Henry Fonda, Donald Crisp, Sara Allgood, Ava Gardner, Grace Kelly and Jack Lemmon.

A young would-be director once came to him for advice, and Ford pointed out two landscape photographs in his office. One had the horizon at the top of the picture, and the other had it at the bottom of the picture. Ford said, "When you know why the horizon goes at the top of the frame or the bottom of a frame, then you're a director," and threw the kid out of his office. The would-be director was Steven Spielberg.