

JOHN FORD'S *STAGECOACH*

Stagecoach, Reviewed by Paul Brenner on Jan 16 2000, <http://www.filmcritic.com/reviews/1939/stagecoach/>

Some movies are watershed films, taking a debased genre and reinventing it on a higher level -- films like *Birth of a Nation*, *The Kid*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Godfather*... and John Ford's *Stagecoach*.

Coming at the end of a decade of a cheap, low rent formula westerns -- the Gower Gulch hack jobs that came in the wake of the collapse of the epic western cycle in the early thirties (*The Big Trail*, *Cimarron*)-- *Stagecoach* infused these Saturday afternoon horse operas with mythic underpinnings and an emotional depth that never existed before.

This was Ford's first oater since his silent *3 Bad Men* from 1926 and Ford deliberately set out to fashion a classic western. Taking a shopworn premise, a stagecoach trying to make its way through hostile Indian territory to the safety of civilization in Lordsburg, Ford refashioned this action tale into a tale of storied redemption.

Ford populates his stagecoach with genre stereotypes -- Dallas (Claire Trevor), the whore with the heart of gold; Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell), the effusive town drunk; Peacock, (the meek Donald Meek), a whiskey salesman whom Doc latches onto immediately; Hatfield (John Carradine), the elegant and proud Southern gambler and proponent of the South; Gatewood (Berton Churchill), the apoplectic banker anxious to get out of town with the his bank's funds; Mrs. Mallory (Louise Platt), an upper crust pregnant woman out to meet up with her soldier husband; Buck (Andy Devine), the comic relief stagecoach driver; and Curly (George Bancroft), the sheriff out to prevent a shootout in Lordsburg. Ford takes these characters, puts them together in the enclosed space of a stagecoach and watches the cardboard characters pop and explode, exploring how their stereotypical veneers are melted away to reveal desires, needs, and regrets that were never explored in westerns before this one.

And then there's the Ringo Kid -- John Wayne's first big role with John Ford. Wayne, after jumping Ford's ship as a bit player, jumped at the chance to star in Raoul Walsh's ill-fated *The Big Trail* in 1930, after which he was relegated to a decade of cut rate western fillers. Offered this last big chance with Ford, Wayne locks eyes with the camera and for the next 40 years he never let go. From his opening shot, holding up the stagecoach for a ride, his cinematic presence is breathtaking (even the camera operator couldn't take it -- as the camera tracks in to Wayne's face, the camera goes slightly out of focus for a few seconds and, mistake or not, makes Wayne's close-up all the more impressive). Wayne plays Ringo with a doomed foreboding worthy of Eugene O'Neill, and when he proposes that Dallas come with him to his half-finished ranch ('A man could live there... and a woman') his longing is felt like a brooding ghost.

More than just character study, *Stagecoach* doesn't skimp on the reliable genre action scenes. There is the obligatory final-reel western showdown on dark city streets and, most impressively, an exciting Indian attack on the stagecoach with unbelievable stunt work by Yakima Canutt, doubling the action as both an Indian who falls under the rampaging stagecoach and as Ringo, hopping bareback onto the careening horses and taking back control of the runaway stagecoach.

Here too is Ford's first use of his iconic western location of Monument Valley. The towering buttes and the troubling sky pick out the tiny stagecoach rambling through the desert, rendering human affairs paltry and

insignificant in the face of a dispassionate non-human environment. This fits in perfectly with Ford's pointing out that the exemplars of civilization (Mrs. Mallory, Gatewood, Peacock) all have something to learn from society's outcasts (Ringo, Dallas, Doc), who all prove stronger and sturdier against the malevolent forces of the Apaches and the cool and disinterested landscape than the denizens who make up this small western society.

At the end, when Ringo and Dallas are given a free pass to escape Lordsburg and head off to Ringo's ranch, we are all grateful for their escape from Lordsburg -- the big town that is gloomy, sleazy and corrupt. When Doc says, 'Well, that saves them from the blessings of civilization,' we all feel blessed. That is, until the movie ends and we are back in civilization ourselves.

<http://www.filmsite.org/stagec.html> (Excerpts)

Stagecoach (1939) is a classic Western from film auteur John Ford. This film - his first sound Western - was a return to his most-acclaimed film genre after a thirteen year absence following Fox's *Three Bad Men* (1926) (and *The Iron Horse* (1924)). In the meantime, he had produced the superb, Oscar-winning drama about Irish republicanism, RKO's *The Informer* (1935).

...Major social issues and themes (sexual and social prejudice, alcoholism, childbirth, greed, shame, redemption and revenge) are closely mixed together into an exciting adventure story.

The structure of the film is very formal, divided neatly into eight episodes (four scenes of action alternating with four scenes of character interaction).

The short prologue regarding the cavalry and the telegraph wires

The 12-minute expository sequence in the town of Tonto, including the introduction of most of the characters and the establishment of their class distinctions

The first leg of the trip on the stagecoach to Lordsburg

The Dry Fork way station where the coach stops for food - includes the memorable dinner table scene

The second leg of the trip toward Apache Wells in the snow

The Apache Wells (Mexican) outpost, where Lucy's baby is born

The final leg of the trip to Lordsburg, including the exciting Indian attack and the cavalry rescue

The town of Lordsburg, where Ringo Kid faces the Plummers in a shoot-out

STAGECOACH, Frank S. Nugent, *New York Times*, March 3, 1939

In one superbly expansive gesture, which we (and the Music Hall) can call *Stagecoach*, John Ford has swept aside ten years of artifice and talkie compromise and has made a motion picture that sings a song of camera. It moves, and how beautifully it moves, across the plains of Arizona, skirting the sky-reaching mesas of Monument Valley, beneath the piled-up cloud banks which every photographer dreams about, and through all the old-fashioned, but never really outdated, periods of prairie travel in the scalp-raising seventies, when Geronimo's Apaches were on the warpath. Here, in a sentence, is a movie of the grand old school, a genuine rib-thumper, and a beautiful sight to see.

Mr. Ford is not one of your subtle directors, suspending sequences on the wink of an eye or the precisely calculated gleam of a candle in a mirror. He prefers the broadest canvas, the brightest colors, the widest brush, and the boldest possible strokes. He hews to the straight narrative line with the well-reasoned

confidence of a man who has seen that narrative succeed before. He takes no shadings from his characters: either they play it straight or they don't play at all. He likes his language simple and he doesn't want too much of it. When his Redskins bite the dust, he expects to hear the thud and see the dirt spurt up. Above all, he likes to have things happen out in the open, where his camera can keep them in view.

He has had his way in *Stagecoach* with Walter Wanger's benison, the writing assistance of Dudley Nichols, and the complete cooperation of a cast which had the sense to appreciate the protection of being stereotyped. You should know, almost without being told, the station in life (and in frontier melodrama) of the eight passengers on the Overland stage from Tonto to Lordsburg.

To save time, though, here they are: "Doc" Boone, a tipsy man of medicine; Major Hatfield, professional gambler, once a Southern gentleman and a gentleman still; Dallas, a lady of such transparently dubious virtue that she was leaving Tonto by popular request; Mrs. Mallory, who, considering her condition, had every reason to be hastening to her army husband's side; Mr. Gatewood, an absconding banker and windbag; Mr. Peacock, a small and timid whiskey salesman destined by Bacchus to be Doc Boone's traveling companion; Sheriff Wilcox; and his prisoner, the Ringo Kid. The driver, according to the rules, had to be Slim Summerville or Andy Devine; Mr. Devine got the call.

So onward rolls the stage, nobly sped by its six stout-hearted bays, and out there, somewhere behind the buttes and crags, Geronimo is lurking with his savage band, the United States Cavalry is biding its time to charge to the rescue, and the Ringo Kid is impatiently awaiting his cue to stalk down the frontier-town street and blast it out with the three Plummer boys. But foreknowledge doesn't cheat Mr. Ford of his thrills. His attitude, if it spoke its mind, would be: "All right, you know what's coming, but have you ever seen it done like this?" And once you've swallowed your heart again, you'll have to say: "No, sir! Not like this!"

His players have taken easily to their chores, all the way down the list from Claire Trevor's Dallas to Tom Tyler's Hank Plummer. But the cutest coach-rider in the wagon, to our mind, was little Donald Meek as Mr. Peacock, the whiskey-drummer. That, of course, is not meant as a slight to Thomas Mitchell as the toping Dr. Boone, to Louise Platt as the wan Mrs. Mallory, George Bancroft as the sheriff, or John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. They've all done nobly by a noble horse opera, but none so nobly as its director. This is one stagecoach that's powered by a Ford.

***Stagecoach*, Staff, *Variety* Staff, Tue., Feb. 7, 1939**

Sweeping and powerful drama of the American frontier, "Stagecoach" displays potentialities that can easily drive it through as one of the surprise big grossers of the year. Without strong marquee names, picture nevertheless presents wide range of exploitation to attract, and will carry far through word-of-mouth after it gets rolling.

Directorially, production is John Ford in peak form, sustaining interest and suspense throughout, and presenting exceptional characterizations. Picture is a display of photographic grandeur....

In maintaining a tensely dramatic pace all the way, Ford still injects numerous comedy situations, and throughout sketches his characters with sincerity and humaneness. It's absorbing drama without the general theatrics usual to picturizations of the early west. There's no individual heavy--suspense is maintained at a high peak by continual threat of Indian attack along the route. The running fight between the stage coach

passengers and the Apaches has been given thrilling and realistic presentation by Ford. In contrast, his direction of the hacienda sequences, during the arrival of the baby, is an extremely tender episode.

Photography by Bert Glennon throughout is exceptional. Music score also does much to add to the value.

“Enter the Ringo Kid,” Jeffrey M. Anderson, <http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/stagec.shtml>

Note: I wrote the above review over a decade ago, and probably after having seen the movie on a cruddy old VHS tape. I have seen *Stagecoach* many times since, and have come to love it....

The thing about watching *Stagecoach* in 1998 is that it does come across as a textbook, an essential piece of film history to be studied, but not savored. I've found that the more one learns about film, the better *Citizen Kane* gets, but also the more one learns about film, the less interesting *Stagecoach* becomes. Yes, Ford elevated the western to more elegant heights, but Scorsese did the same to the gangster film with *Good Fellas* without matching the elegance and honesty of *Mean Streets*.

Before *Stagecoach*, westerns were pretty much by-the-numbers good guy vs. bad guy flicks. Ford changed everything by loading a cross-section of society into a stagecoach travelling across Apache territory. The rich folks look down their noses at the scoundrels, but the scoundrels are the ones with the heart and the courage to be the heroes at the end of the day. It's a pretty great formula that has been copied a thousand times in the cinema, but in *Stagecoach*, it looks, well, like a textbook. Part of the problem was the screenplay by the pretentious Dudley Nichols, whom Ford took very seriously. While other directors were able to dilute Nichols' work to make it more bearable, Ford enhanced it. Ford's sentiment that he inherited from D.W. Griffith ages badly, and it coats the film with a sticky goo that distances the modern day viewer.

Ford and his stuntman Yakima Canutt also invented some incredible stuntwork and action sequences for the Apache battle. One Apache climbs on, around, and under the horses and the coach itself before he is shot and knocked off. These scenes are impressive, and they bring the film briefly to life, but they, too, have been integrated so firmly into film language that it's no longer a surprise.

The movie's biggest accomplishment was casting John Wayne in the role of the Ringo Kid. It's a great sympathetic role of a jailbreaker and sharpshooter who falls passionately in love with the prostitute (Claire Trevor). It won him a stardom seldom equalled in the movies, and led to a great many more movies, at least a dozen of them masterpieces. Thomas Mitchell won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his portrayal of the drunken doctor. John Carradine is also on board, but in a role hardly worth mentioning.

One has only to look at Ford's friend Howard Hawks to see how far they had advanced. By 1939, Hawks had already made *Scarface*, *Twentieth Century*, *Bringing Up Baby*, and *Only Angels Have Wings*, movies much more sophisticated in technique and character. I don't think Ford hit his stride until after World War II, with films like *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *The Fugitive* (1947) and the Cavalry Trilogy (1948-50).

One should see *Stagecoach* in order to know its place in film history, but I find that I can not get excited about it. One would rather wrestle with poetry than textbooks.