"THE PRISONER OF SHARK ISLAND" (20th Century Fox, 1936)
Directed by John Ford; produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; screenplay by Nunnally Johnson; Musical Director, Louis Silvers; photographed by Bert Glennon; edited by Jack Murray; 9 reels


Although a trifle uneven, with the melodramatics of the second half of the film never quite matching the near-documentary quality of the first half, "The Prisoner of Shark Island" nevertheless remains one of Ford's best and most stylish films of the mid-30's. And few Ford films -- or individual Ford sequences -- have ever generated more suspense than the brilliantly done episode of the escape from the prison island.

Although a familiar item on television today, the film is rarely shown complete there -- and not always for reasons of length. Material most frequently cut includes the mob hysteria scenes following the death of Lincoln, and the scenes in which the jury is instructed to bring in a "Guilty" verdict regardless of the evidence. The grim execution scenes are often trimmed, as are the many scenes of negro revolt and hysteria in the plague episodes. Too, the dialogue explaining that Claude Gillingwater has been shot down by Union troops is often deleted. This print has been carefully restored from a number of other prints, and is intact in every way.

The story is based on the persecution of one Dr. Samuel Mudd, who was unjustly convicted of being one of the conspirators in the Lincoln assassination plot. Inevitably, there are some simplifications. While Mudd was entirely innocent of conspiracy, he did apparently recognize John Wilkes Booth when the latter came to him with a broken leg, a fact that is disregarded here in order to leave no doubt at all of the doctor's thorough innocence. And the incredibly savage and inhuman treatment meted out to the conspirators prior to their trial is entirely passed over, thus whitewashing the Reconstruction government to a degree that its punitive actions at least seem solely political in motivation. However, from "The Birth of a Nation" on films about the Reconstruction era have always raised ticklish problems, and for the most part Ford handles his history both realistically and dramatically. Oddly enough though, he makes no mention of the fact that Mudd's notoriety helped coin those two familiar phrases -- "His name will be mud" and "Here's mud in your eye" -- phrases that stuck permanently, even after Mudd had been pardoned.

The film opens with a beautifully constructed episode of Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theatre; in terms of its mixture of documentary reconstruction with pure filmic poetry, I think it even surpasses the same sequence as done earlier, twice, by Griffith. The trial and execution episodes are likewise brilliantly handled, and if the later sequences, fine as they are, don't quite match up it's only because the Hollywood touch, and the interweaving of showmanship with fact, are more obvious. But it remains a film of great personal style throughout, and also, one might add, quite a cunningly made film. Basically it is quite an inexpensive picture. There are few big or extensive sets, and, as in "The Informer", Ford covers this by using a lot of closeups, and by staging most of his big exterior scenes at night. The film never once suggests cheapness, and what we see of the sets always suggests that there's a great deal more that we're not seeing.

In terms of its performers, the film is well-served too. That excellent actor Warner Baxter gives one of his best performances, and the cast is full of not only Baxter but Van Heflin and Harry Carey, and many of the Ford "reliables" too. The basic pattern and cast of the following year's "Sons of the Soil" suggest that it may have originally planned for Ford as an unofficial follow-up to this film. But Ford didn't direct and Tay Garnett did -- and the film, though consistently interesting, never quite measures up to its potential and certainly never approaches the quality of "The Prisoner of Shark Island", which was probably the best Ford between "The Lost Patrol" of 1934, "Young Mr. Lincoln" and "Stagecoach" of 1939. (And I'm not forgetting the important but surely much over-rated "The Informer").

- Intermission -
"MY DARLING CLEMENTINE" (20th Century Fox, 1946) Produced by Samuel G. Engel; directed by John Ford; screenplay by Samuel G. Engel and Winston Miller from the book "Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal" by Sam Hellman and Stuart N. Lake; photographed by Joe MacDonald; Art Direction by James Basevi and Lyle Wheeler; music by Alfred Newman; edited by Dorothy Spencer; 97 mins.


"My Darling Clementine" was Ford's first western since "Stagecoach", and though very well received at the time, it has somehow tended to become submerged in recent years by the whole group of Cavalry and "eastern" War westerns, mostly with John Wayne, that Ford launched himself on with 1947's "Fort Apache". To my knowledge, the last theatrical showing that the film had in New York was at the Astors some eight years ago, and since then its only exposure was during the Museum's Ford cycle some four or five years ago. Of course, it is frequently available on TV, but one hardly counts such inadequate representation. When I saw the film again, almost by accident, a couple of months ago, I was stunned at what a beautiful job it still was, and surprised at how casually it had come to be accepted -- and half-forgotten.

"My Darling Clementine" surely must be the most austere and disciplined of all Ford's westerns. Somehow that word "discipline" seems to apply to so much of Ford's Fox pictures, which have far fewer lapses into banality, low-grade allegate comedy and excessive sentimentality than the films on which he seems to have been left entirely alone ("Rio Grande", "Rings of Bright Water", "The Last Hurrah"). Supervision of any kind is usually regarded as a horrendous restriction to inflict on any creative artist, but with Ford it seems to have been an asset, for his whole group of Fox films are among the most tasteful he ever made.

Perhaps "My Darling Clementine" is a little too formal, a little too studied in its camerawork. But if that is so, it is magnificently formal, and the photography is some of the finest black-and-white work captured for any western. The chase after the stagecoach, with its smooth running inserts, and the later pursuit into the gathering dusk, are classics of their kind. And for all its careful groupings and cunning use of space, outdoors, and the Monument Valley formations, much of the usual Ford warmth and spontaneity are present in full measure.

The film is austere and poetic, yet vital, slick and glossy too. In its own way, it is as removed from the rugged realism of Bill Hart as were the circus stunts of T on Dix. But after all, there is no rule of thumb that says that all westerns have to be grim and stark; Ford's "My Darling Clementine" evokes the feel of the old West as well as Hart's "Rumbleweeds" reflected it. And as one of the best of the many Wyatt Earp chronicles, it makes for especially interesting comparison with next month's "Law and Order" (1932) an Earp western very much in the Hart mould.

The Wyatt Earp tale has been told many times, in "A" westerns like Tournur's "Wichita", in middle-bracketers like "Tombstone" (with Richard Dix as Earp), in grade-B 6-reelers like Bill Elliott's "In Early Arizona", and of course most recently on television in half-hour format. Ford's version here was the third to be made by Fox from the Hellman-Lake book. The first, in the early 20's, starred George O'Brien, and the second, in the late 30's, Randolph Scott. (Both were called "Frontier Marshall"). Curiously, Ward Bond was in all three versions, and Charlie Stevens was in the last two -- though strangely, Ford tries to hide Stevens' face in his version, as he seems to hide the faces of one or two other key characters that somehow don't appeal to him.

All in all, "My Darling Clementine" is both a top western and a top Ford -- and miles ahead of the stuffy, pretentious and dull "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" (John Sturges, with Burt Lancaster as Earp) -- the last major movie on the Earp clan. Its gun-battle climax is beautifully done, although the feeling of cold-blooded participation, I think that the lively climax of Edward Dax's "Law and Order" still comes out on top! -- Wm. K. Everson

Next Tuesday - a STERNBERG program - DISHONOR (1921) SHANGHAI LUSTRE (1941)