Early Sound Westerns: the Hart Tradition

THE RANGE FEUD (Columbia, 1931) Directed by J. Ross Lederer
Written by Milton Krims; photographed by Ben Kline; 6 re.

Not until Bill Elliott in the late 40's and 50's, with series at Republic and Allied Artists, did any star of "B" westerns consciously strive to copy the William S. Hart screen character and plots. But in the early 30's, when Ken Maynard, Tom Tyler and other prominent westerns were for the most part sticking to the slick, streamlined pattern established by Tom Mix, Buck Jones - who had started out at Fox as a second-string Mix - came closest to emulating the fairly restrained and austere Hart brand of western that had been off the screen for over five years.

Jones' first series of Columbia westerns were of course purely programmers, with no time for the depth or subtlety of Hart's films, yet as "B" films they were well above average. Indirectly, the rather crude production values attendant on most "B" westerns of the period -- including the lack of background music and erratic camera speeds -- helped in creating an appropriately "unpolished" atmosphere. That same lack of polish in the Maynards and Tylers, aiming at slickness rather than conviction, was a liability rather than an asset.

Curiously, the Jones Campions seem to be split into two camps. There are those like "Border Law" and "White Eagle" which have standard plots but which are jammed to the gills with traditional western action. And there are others in which a definite attempt seems to have been made at off-beat story and characterisation, often at the expense of action. "The Range Feud" falls into this latter category; it is not one of Buck's best from this period, but it is one of the most typical of Buck in a Hart framework. The action element is good -- there's a rousing fight, and the usual chases -- but many excuses for action are deliberately shunned in favor of a more logical development. Buck, like Hart, faces the old friendship-or-duty dilemma, and like Hart too, works himself up into a towering rage before beating up the villain in a vicious fistic set-to. Most of the chases are handled in long shots with telephoto lenses, partly because the location where most of the film was shot doesn't seem to have been equipped with smooth roads for the running-insert camera trucks, but also possibly because it was a device of which Buck did not seem especially fond in this period. (It is interesting to note that all of the circus-type westerns, Mix, Maynard, Thomson et al., used riding closorups extensively; Hart, Jones, Harry Carey and their breed used them hardly at all, although all were expert horsemen, and Jones especially. His later Universal westerns were full of them, but Universal directors like Ray Taylor automatically regarded them as grade "A" essentials in any horse opera.)

"The Range Feud" in any event is an unremarkable but solid and well above average little "B", interesting too for giving us an early John Wayne, and a radiantly beautiful (but hopelessly inert dramatically) Susan Fleming. What a pity that there weren't more films like "Million Dollar Legs" to offer her those perfect "beautiful but not too bright" roles.

When Buck later formed his own company at Universal (sometimes writing and directing as well as starring) his emulating of Hart became more apparent, most notably in "Stone of Silver Creek", a blood-brother to "Hell's Hinges". Both Hart and Jones needed a little control however; Hart liked to lay on the sentiment, and Jones fancied himself as a folksy "Will Rogers" comedian -- which he certainly wasn't. "The Range Feud" was made before Buck had enough control over his pictures to insist on comic interludes!
LAW AND ORDER (Universal, 1931-32) Directed by Edward L. Cahn
Adapted by John Huston and Tom Reed from "Saint Johnson" by W.R. Burnett; camera - Jackson Rose; edited by Milton Carruth.


I can think of no other sound western, save perhaps "Billy the Kid" by King Vidor, which so recaptured the documentary-like austerity of the Hart (and Ince) westerns as this forgotten little classic. There is of course no rule of thumb that says that westerns have to be "stark" and "austere" to be good, but it is a pity that this unglamorous and gutsy approach was so ignored in sound westerns. All of the great sound westerns, from "Stagecoach" and "Shane" back to "Cimarron" and "The Plainsman" and thence to "The Wagonmaster", regardless of their own individual merits, have all been glossy pictures. That recent little gem "Ride the High Country" almost made it, but not quite. Ford's own Wyatt Earp film, "My Darling Clementine", which we showed a few weeks ago, is a magnificent job -- yet by the side of this one, it is just too recently a "production", but together with the best cameramen, art directors and musical direction, "Law and Order" may not be one of the "great" westerns, but it is certainly one of the "best".

Although based on a novel by W.R. Burnett and presented as fiction, it is patently based on the Wyatt Earp legends and facts -- and Huston makes one of the most convincing of all the Earps. Others have included Fonda, George O'Brien, Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea, Hugh O'Brian, Richard Dix, Bill Elliott and Burt Lancaster). It is slowly paced, never exploiting action for its own sake, but it comes to its climax (the O.K. Corral battle) with one of the most savage and exciting gun-fights ever put on film. Its flawless construction, photography (the camera seems to dart in and out of the action like a participant rather than a spectator) and editing quite outclass the similar, more highly touted yet inferior climactic battle in "High Noon". In its bravado, it recalls the climactic duel in Hart's "Wild Bill Hickok", but it is far more logical and believable than that colorful but rather unconvincing set-to.

Despite the quality of the film, its director, Edward L. Cahn, remained comparatively obscure though consistently active. A former editor who had worked for Paul Fejos on "The Last Performance" and "Broadway", Cahn was here directing; his first film. In its frequent use of crane shots, it suggests that he was still very much under the influence of Fejos. However, although some of Cahn's immediate follow-up films were interesting, he never again duplicated the quality of this film, and like Dupont with "Variety", remained essentially a one-picture director. However, if he didn't achieve greater stature as a director of note, he did achieve considerable stature, at least within the trade, as a slick, fast, always reliable director of quickies -- and there's an art in that too. Not many directors can be given an eight-day schedule, bring the picture in on five days, and still give it that fast-paced, professional look. Cahn has -- and still does. And while thirty expert but unimportant quickies aren't worth one "Law and Order", still such a talent -- in such a niche -- is not to be despised.

No small share of the credit for "Law and Order" should be allocated to scripter Huston, for a narrative that is straightforward, exciting, and often curiously poignant. One regrets minor elements -- the clichéd use of the undertakers for an unnecessary and obvious joke -- and there is a sort of error in folk-lore in having one of the characters refer to
Aces and Eights as a "dead man's hand" while elsewhere in the film mention is made of the still-living Hickok (whose murder occasioned that superstition). But these are minor flaws in a powerful and often creative narrative, that has one of the most perfect endings of any western. It is rather sad to compare this script with the revamped one whipped up for Universal's technicolored, gory and sexy remake in 1953. Although the plot's essentials remained the same, all the strength and subtlety of the original were removed and replaced with violence and eroticaism. The original film had no leading lady at all; the remake had two, and a plethora of plunging necklines and bedroom suggestiveness. The very touching sequence in this original in which the honest lawmen are forced to hang a good-natured, accidental killer, became a stereotyped lynching by the villains in the new version.

Other than a piano tinkling "Those Indeering Young Charms" there is no music in "Law and Order". Tombstone's saloon looks like a crude Inceville collection of boards and planking. (How did Ford's Tombstone in "My Darling Clementine" ever manage to acquire that magnificently photogenic bar?) The costuming has that "right" look to it, and as the main heavy, Ralph Ince lends an appropriately authentic flavor. From its opening montage of the building of the West (lifted quite largely from the serial "The Indians Are Coming" -- you may spot Tim McCoy and Francis Ford in odd shots) to its effective closing of dawn, dust, and a mournful church bell tolling, "Law and Order" is a classic piece of western Americana. It doesn't seem likely that Universal, at the time, realised quite what a good film it was; certainly it must have seemed rather small potatoes stacked up against "Cimarron" and "The Big Trail". When it was reissued in the early 50's, Realart gave it a new title ("Guns A'Blazing") and promptly forgot it. It had but three plays in New York -- one in Harlem, one at the Chelsea on 8th Avenue, and, much later, a two-day run at the Times Square in 42nd St.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---

Next Tuesday

D.W. Griffith's "THE SORROWS OF SATAN" (1926) with Lya de Putti, Adolphe Menjou, Carol Dempster, Ricardo Cortez, Ivan Lebedeff; Edwin S. Porter's "Life of an American Police Man" (1906) and "The Bond" (1918) with Charlie Chaplin and Edna Purviance

PLEASE NOT E: THERE WILL BE NO SUNDAY MORNIN SHOW AT THE NEW YORKER THIS COMING SUNDAY. WE WILL PROBABLY BE SCREENING ON THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY -- SEE NOTES NEXT TUESDAY.

---

Coming -- CLARA BOW, Ferdy Maymont, Ernest Torrence in "MANTRAP" Directed by Victor Fleming

A program of mystery from the 30's -- James Whale's REMEMBER LAST NIGHT? with Edward Arnold, Reginald Denny, Constance Cummings, Gustav von Seyffertitz; and THE FOUR JUST MEN with Frank Lawton, Anna Lee, Francis L. Sullivan, a lively Hitchcockian thriller about a plot "to destroy the British Empire and place world domination in the hands of one man!" ... A horror program, coupling Lewton's ISLE OF THE DEAD (Karloff) with THE RAVEN (Karloff-Lugosi) ... BILLION DOLLAR SCANDAL, with Olga Baclanova, Frank Morgan, Constance Cummings .... Frank Capra's BROADWAY BILL with Warner Baxter, Myrna Loy, Walter Connolly.