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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Westerns


To far too many people, "B" westerns, like cartoons, are all tarred by the same brush — program fodder unworthy of attention or differentiation. Actually there is as much distinction between the work of one star and another, one company and another, one director and another, as there is in any other area of film — perhaps more so, since in the "B" western, with limited budgets and brief shooting schedules, genuine talent gets far more of a chance to shine. The difference between a really top "B" western — say one of the excellent George O'Brien Roes of the late '30s, distinguished not only by the stars but by superior story and direction, values, or the best Republics of the '30's & '40s, which have never been topped for slickness, camerawork and the expert staging of fast action — and a low-grade quickie by Aja, Resolute or PRC is quite incredible. They may only be $10,000 apart in budget, but there's as much difference between them as there is between Griffith's "Intolerance" and Sam Katzmann's "Slaves of Babylon." Columbia, which in the late '40s and '50s was turning out the cheapest and dullest of "B" westerns, in the early '30s was turning out some of the very best. Buck Jones and Tim McCoy both had their own units, and reasonable freedom to make their pictures their own way — at least they attempted to. They were rugged, gutsy, characterly made, and — despite the number of them — all rest very well with the Columbia McCoy's. "The End of the Trail" is one of the most impressive of the Columbia McCoys, and in many ways one of the most impressive of all "B" westerns. I don't want to over-nail it by describing it or discussing it; suffice it to say that it is a pocket "Broken Arrow," and a very sincere preachment on the exploitation of the American Indian. There is no real villain as such, and the only concession to formula is a mild touch of unnecessary (but unobtrusive) comedy. For the rest it is moving, often poignant, and surprisingly spectacular in its action sequences. The unusual care taken with it, and the fact that the McCoy unit shooting on some of the same locations which provided one or two of the film's biggest stock shots, so that there is perfect matching up of old and new, and the limited use of stock is never apparent at all. Similar in spirit to the more elaborate silent historical westerns that McCoy had made for MGM, "The End of the Trail" is obviously quite sincerely felt by McCoy — so much so that twice the plot literally stops dead in its tracks for McCoy to deliver lengthy speeches. Direction is always reliable D. Ross Lederman, who had a habit of turning out some of the best in whichever he set his hand, including McCoy's "Riding Tornado," Dick Foran's "Moonlight on the Prairie" for Warners, and George O'Brien's "Backeters of the Range" for Rko, superior horse operas all of them.


Ford's "Stagecoach" in 1939 launched what is still the most prolific and most profitable of all cycles, the cycle of "Dodge City" and "Western Union," and also brought off into a secondary series of "badmen" bio-pics, headed by "The Jamesons," "White Star," and one of those of "the great bandits" of the Cong. These "The Daltons Rode." Originally designed as a type of prestige feature, with Walter Pidgeon planned for the lead, it soon admirably descended into formula. Historically it is naive and lackluster in authenticating data, romance and comedy are commonplace, and there is even a hidden villain! But in terms of pace and breathless action, it is superb, and once it gets going, keeps going at a cracking rate. Some doubles and buck projection notwithstanding, the chases and stunt scenes — many of them staged by Assistant director Vernon Keays, an old hand at the action stuff in "B" westerns — are superbly handled, and some stunt scenes — such as the jumping of horses from a moving train — have never been duplicated.

Unfortunately, the second-rate material "The Daltons Ride Again" (second-rate mainly because of a nothing budget) was strangely, more accurate historically (this original doesn't even identify Coffeyville, and kills off all the Daltons, despite the script credit to one of them!), "When the Daltons Rode," no epic, no classic, is nevertheless a minor masterpiece of sustained and skillfully staged action. — W. K. Express.