"THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS" (Rko Radio, 1936) Directed by JOHN FORD
Associate Producers: Cliff Reid, Robert Siak; Screenplay by Dudley Nichols from the play by Sean O'Casey; Camera: Joseph August; Music by Nathaniel Shilkret and Roy Webb; Art Director, Van Nest Polglase; edited by George Hively; 7 reels

Ford's last short, programmer-length film has been missing for years; it has neither been reissued nor as yet televised, though since ownership has passed from Rko into other hands it may well turn up in some oddity package one of these days. It was never considered a major Ford, and in 1936 it was still under the shadow of the over-rated "The Informer." Furthermore, between the two "Irish films," Ford turned out three quite exceptional pictures: "The Prisoner of Shark Island," "Steamboat Round the Bend" and "Mary of Scotland," so its cool reception than can be understood. The intervening three decades haven't made it a better picture - or a worse one - but they've somehow changed it quite a bit. The film's saving graces today are its robust action and a lack of pretension in Ford's direction, qualities that in 1936 probably prevented it from being taken too seriously. On the other hand, O'Casey's dialogue and characters date incredibly; the shawl-clad women, the street singer, the lines of wild poetry all combine to push it dangerously near to parody at times. (Admittedly, this kind of writing has been parodied since, and, not having read the O'Casey original, I may be wrong in blaming him rather than Nichols).

But regardless of the dated literary quality, it's difficult to take the film really seriously - at least on an emotional and dramatic level - because Ford himself, professional Irishman that he is, also seems unwilling to commit himself on a serious level. His and Nichols' approach seems to be that everybody must know all about the Irish "troubles" (few do, and even fewer seem to care) and that therefore they can be treated, like the Russian Revolution or the American Civil War, as a convenient backdrop for romantic tribulations and action sequences. "The Plough and the Stars" uses Ireland's problems the way "Barbara Frietchie" used the Civil War, or "Tempest" the Russian Revolution; indeed, many of the faces and types seem literally transposed. Tricky and even dull though it was, "The Informer" was at least convincing; with more elaborate sets and bigger production values, "The Plough and the Stars" is always theatrical (in a movie sense, not in the original O'Casey sense) and rarely convincing. Stanwyck has her big hysterical scene - obligatory for her as much as for Jean Gabin - early in the proceedings, and as soon as she has calmed down, there are others ready to take over. Despite the utilisation of the Abbey Players, and the credit to Arthur Shields as an assistant director, Ford seems to have had his own way the whole time. The result is a film suspiciously akin to the spirit of "Fort Apache," with the splendidly staged action sequences dominating, and the British substituting for the Apaches.

That it is an enjoyable and a typical Ford rather than a major one should be no cause for misgivings; it's a handsome film to watch, and often a very exciting one, even though it goes nowhere. (Although it would be difficult for any film about Irish rebels to really go anywhere, or for audiences to work up much sympathy for their mischief-making). Interviewed for the Peter Bogdanovich book on his career, Ford commented that after he had shot the film it was subsequently re-edited and partially re-shot, in order to make it appear that the married couple (Stanwyck-Foster) were actually not married, thus creating some kind of romantic sex suspense. He claimed that this was the version used in the US, while his original was retained for Europe. It's difficult to see how such tampering could (a) help, or (b) even be practical. Such a key plot element would indeed be hard to conceal in any but the clumsiest manner. I suspect that it may have been tried out and abandoned, and that Ford is in error in claiming that it actually went into release that way. But in any event, tonight's print is from a European source, and is of the original version as shot and approved by Ford.

William K. Everson