An evening of Fox Zane Grey westerns with George O’Brien

LAST OF THE DUANES (Fox, 1930) Directed by Alfred Worker; scenario by Ernest Pascal from the novel by Zane Grey; camera, Daniel Clark; 6 reels

RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE (Fox, 1931) Directed by Hamilton MacFadden; Associate Producer, Raymond Rainger; scenario by John Goodrich, Philip Klein and Barry Commins from a story by Zane Grey; Camera, George Schneiderman; Art Director, Ben Cerella; 5 reels.

THE RAINBOW TRAIL (a sequel to “Riders of the Purple Sage” (Fox, 1931) Directed by David Howard; scenario by Philip Klein and Barry Commins from the Zane Grey story; Camera, Daniel Clark; 6 reels

In terms of top quality “B” westerns, Fox virtually had the field to themselves in the very early 30’s. MGM had abandoned “B” westerns entirely; Warners were between their series of silent Maynard and talkie Wayne; Rko hadn’t yet begun their Tom Keene series; the Columbia and Universal series were well below the budgetary allocations of Fox, and Paramount’s Zane Grey series was all talkie, although it would make tremendous strides in 1933. For the rest, the market was flooded with really cheap independent westerns done with a notable lack of finesse. For all the short running times, the Fox “B” westerns had good scripts and casts (they were often equally good for Warners’ O’Sullivan, Bogart, Zuma Loy and other fledgling stars), the best camera, rugged action, and superb locations. Despite their brevity, they got good NY first-runs. “The Rainbow Trail” opened at the Roxy and usually very good reviews. O’Brien, fresh from his big vehicle for John Ford, was still a potent name, and was always one of the very best western stars around, combining good acting ability with genuine athletic skill (he used far less doubles than any other western star) and a likeable and unique sense of humor. The high cost of these “B”s made for quality difficult to sustain and each year they became a little cheaper and less impressive. Nevertheless, the early ones are standouts and are virtually unknown today. With the exception of “The Golden West” the only early one on which a negative survives, they are unprotested saves for a few rapidly deteriorating 35mm studio prints. They have never been on television and probably won’t be; today’s prints are reversals made from these surviving studio prints. Sound quality is thus often not of the best, and “Riders of the Purple Sage” has more than its quota of jump-cuts, but this is ALL that is left, and we are lucky to have been able to watch these (and a handful of others) before we’ll play off eventually.

But Fox owned a handful of Zane Grey properties which they remade periodically; Bill Furnum did the first; then Tom Mix (though their complicated plots and multiplicity of deadly serious characters made them not altogether suitable for the ebullient Mix personality), O’Brien in the 30’s, and a trio (two with George O’Brien, one with John Kibbrough) in the 40’s. Unlike the Paramount Zane Greys, which often changed radically with each remake, Fox seemed to use the same basic script each time, and one even finds identical (non-Grey) dialogue being repeated in the sound versions. The 1929 “Last of the Duane’s” (a prelude to “The Lone Star Ranger”) is incredibly like the later George Montgomery remake even to the casting of Eve Arden in the Zuma Loy role. It’s a good one, with a strong climax, though the least of tonight’s trio.

“Riders of the Purple Sage” (in which stars George O’Brien and Marguerite Churchill met – and married) has some unusually elaborate sets design and glass-shot work by the great Ben Caré, Tourneur’s old associate; and “The Rainbow Trail” is something of a minor classic of the genre, stunningly photographed against breathtaking locations, and quite superior to the already very good Tom Mix version (which however did make interesting use of snow-bound locations denied to this version). The plot also brings in some mild erotica scenes, including a nude bathing scene involving O’Brien and Cecilia Parker – in which George comes off quite the better of the two. I never have quite been able to buy the sequenced version of “Riders of the Purple Sage” one so understand how one avalanche could seal off entire city of Zuma Loy’s problem, not Fox’s, and the well-chosen cliff locations do do their part to cover this illogic. (Others coming up in due time, not all Zane Grey, but all Fox’s O’Brien’s, include “Smoke Lightning”, “Robber’s Revolt” and “The Holy Terror”).