"THE LONG VOYAGE HOME" (United Artists, 1940) Directed by John Ford
Produced by Walter Wanger; an Argosy Production; screenplay by Dudley Nichols
based on four one-act plays by Eugene O'Neill: "The Moon of the Caribbees",
"Bound East for Cardiff", "In the Zone" and "The Long Voyage Home";
Camera: Gregg Toland; Art Direction, James Basevi; musical score, Richard
Hageman; special effects, R.T. Layton and L.O. Binger; editor, Sherman Todd.
With John Wayne, Thomas Mitchell, Ian Hunter, Barry Fitzgerald, Wilfrid Lawson,
John Qualen, Carole Landis, Beachie, Mildred Natwick, Arthur Shields, Joseph Sawyer, J.K.

Eugene O'Neill is traditionally a "difficult" writer, and automatically a
problematical one to transfer to the screen. Because dialogue was naturally more
important to his plays than "story", his work was all but excluded from the
silent screen, although a long unsean (1923) version of "Anna Christie" reputedly
has a great deal of merit. The talkies made considerable (though never very
profound) inroads on his works. There were the very literary, very respectful, very theatrical (and usually rather dull)
adaptations such as "Emporer Jones", "Anna Christie", "Long Day's Journey Into
Night" and "Desire Under the Elms"; and conversely the more cinematic (and
usually "popul arised" to the point of superficiality and even distortion)
attenuates a la Strange Interlude", "The Constant Woman" and "The Hairy Ape". And
there is a third, smaller grouping, of adaptations which are far more successful
because they combine respect for the original with an equal respect for the motion
picture medium. Into this grouping must fall the two very
pleasing versions of "Ah Wilderness!" (admittedly the "easiest" O'Neill play to
handle in film terms) and quite certainly "The Long Voyage Home". Its total
commitment to film - even though retaining its stress on sommewhat theatrical
dialogue - is emphasised by a comparison with the 1947 filming of O'Neill's
"Kouning Becomes Electra". Dudley Nichols, a superb screenwriter on "The Long
Voyage Home", wrote, produced and directed "Kouning Becomes Electra" with
sincerity and reverence, but with a stiff and awkward inability to make it look
like anything but rigidly filmed theatre.

Ford, seldom a pretentious director, is at his best when his art flows naturally
and logically from his work; when he sets out to make a "prestige art film", as
he did with "The Fugitive" and "Rising of the Moon", the result is usually
pictorial elegance but dramatic disaster. "The Long Voyage Home" however, clearly
designed as a "prestige" film, does work. One suspects that Ford found the
characters rather more interesting than O'Neill's pessimism, for optimism is a
keynote of almost all of Ford's films, even "The Grapes of Wrath". Pictorially
Ford does nothing to further O'Neill's several little speeches about man and
his relationship to the sea. In a Western, and "Stagecoach" in particular,
Ford loves to give us huge closeups of his characters, and then cut to vast
panoramic long shots, so that we are constantly seeing his protagonists in
relation to the land. Admittedly, seascapes offer less opportunity, especially
the seascapes of a wartime, studio-bound film like this. Ford could and did
stress the affinity of man to sea (and man and ship) in other films, and most
notably they are "Expendable", but this was very much the outlook of the combat
Marines, not O'Neill's. Ford does have a leg up on the enlisted man, so one assumes that the merchant navy - as a breed - must
have come even lower in his schel. Hence he is content to leave the philosophising
here very much in the hands of O'Neill and Nichols, and concentrates far
more on the purely cinematic angles. With Gregg Toland - the great cameraman of
"Wuthering Heights" and "Citizen Kane" - he creates a visual mood so consistent
that it convinces throughout, studio-tank and Gaslight-era London streets
notwithstanding. There is no lazy interpolation of stock action footage to "liven
things up" away at the same time as either that mood, the attacking plane for
example is fully by yet effectively in the sequence cut and cut that one
could almost swear it had been seen as well.
Not a huge success when released - despite rave reviews, it needed a sex and
action ad campaign, and Luella Parsons' endorsement as "The greatest sea
adventure since Mutiny on the Bounty" to help sell it - it was generally too
grim and depressing to appeal to audiences in the early stages of World War 2.
It was later revisited, but drastically cut (in several varying versions) in an
emotional conflict - Ford's saga names, and its limited Arthur Studio. The
whole lyric opening was chopped off, and scarcely a sequence didn't have its
middle or end sheared away. Most of the infrequent showings in recent years have
been of this sadly hacked version. Tonight's print has been carefully re-
constructed from a number of prints, resulting in occasional changes of tone and
quality within sequences, but the main thing is that it is all there. A really
beautifully wrought production in every way, with many echoes of other Ford
works (the music, the stock company of players, J.K. Kerrigan's toady character
brought back from "The Informer", Ford's (and Hollywood's) "tableau" tradition, at the
British) it is certainly one of the finest, even if least personal, of all Ford
films.

--- William K. Everson ---