Two Classics of Americana

"LAW AND ORDER" (Universal, 1932) Directed by Edward Cahn
Scenario by John Huston and Tom Reed from "Saint Johnson" by W.R. Burnett; Camera, Jackson Rose; 70 minutes

Despite the commercial success of 1931's "Cimarron" and some early experiments in wide-screen, the Western appeared to have lost its huge popularity in the very early 30's. Lost in the shuffle in this period was "Law and Order", one of the sound cinema's best and most overlooked Westerns. Although based on a novel by W.R. Burnett that used fictional names (probably for reasons of legal clearance - it was clearly built around the lives of Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday and their cohorts, its director, Edward Cahn, had just completed an apprenticeship under art director Paul Fejos, and was anxious to show what he could. His directorial debut was also his artistic zenith; he never again made a film one tenth as good. "Law and Order", partially scripted by John Huston (who must take the blame for some of the dime-novel dialogue) was a slow-paced, gritty western that matched King Vidor's "Sally of the Sawdust" in recapturing the flavor of the old Bill Hart westerns for immediate purposes; its pace was a great plus, but little traditional physical action until the climax, which literally exploded into the finest reconstruction yet of the famous gun duel at the OK Corral. Doubtless influenced by Fejos' always elaborately fluid use of the camera, Cahn made his camera a real participant in the short, tightly edited battle, darting from side to side in subjective viewpoints, or capturing the sudden terror of a frightened horse. Perhaps the real beauty of the film lies in its formal yet unforced style. At the end the lawman who is the sole survivor of the battle rides out of town, weary of killing, yet aware that more such towns await him and his guns; the compositions, stressing his feeling of isolation, the mournful toiling of the church bell; the citizens, glad to have the job done but unwilling to have involved themselves in it; all this achieved a sense of Greek tragedy without consciously striving for it, as "High Noon" was to do. "Law and Order" was remade twice, once as a formula though above-average "Sagebrush" with Johnny Mack Brown in the forties, and again as a Technicolor, action-packed and overly-brutal Ronald Reagan's "A" in the 50's. The original had no women at all, other than for the brief appearance of a dowdy saloon trolley. The Reagan version had two leading ladies, and a great deal of sex and bedroom suggestiveness.

One of the finest and most poignant episodes in tonight's original was the touching sequence in which the 12 women were forced to hang a simple-minded farm lad who had accidentally become a murderer, a sub-theme that effectively stressed that problems of morality and justice could not be dealt as such, but that physical confrontation with enemy forces. In the second remake, this sensitive sequence was distorted into a standard lynching by the villains!

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

"STEAMBOAT Round The Bend" (Fox, 1935) Directed by John Ford
Produced by Sol M. Wurtzel; screenplay by Lamar Trotti and King Vidor from a story by Ben Lucien Burman; Camera George Schneiderman; Asst. Director Edward O'Pearse; 80 minutes

Will Rogers' last film was not only one of his best, but is also one of John Ford's loveliest works, and one of the finest slices of Americana ever put on film. Rogers' fans tend to minimise its value, probably because once the Rogers character is not dominant (as it was, and stickily so, in the better-remembered "David Harum") and it really isn't a Rogers vehicle in the accepted sense. Its charm, sentiment, good old-fashioned schmaltz, comedy both subtle and wild and its excitement are such that Rogers' underplaying certainly helps it, yet it could have been just as good (albeit different) with any Frank Morgan or Henry W. Walthall in the lead.
Slow in starting, the film builds in interest and suspense quite steadily until the marvellous final third of the film - the greatest steamboat race sequence which, apart from being great stuff in itself, forms a logical "race-to-the-rescue" ending, and provides Ford with ample opportunities for literally letting off steam in the comedy department without detracting from the suspense values. This last huge chunk of film, like the final third of "Stagecoach", is superb undistilled Ford, and incidentally makes interesting comparison with the more serious but not dissimilar ending to Griffith's "Intolerance". In fact, while being wholly Fordian, the entire film is a kind of unofficial "homage" to Griffith. All through the film there are images and sequences that bespeak of great affection for the whole business of making film, sequences sometimes that only a Ford could get away with. The episode of the hero playing "Home Sweet Home" on a saw in the death house, the negro prisoners joining him in song, sounds too horrible to contemplate; yet here, because of its sincerity and its refusal to disguise or side-step honest sentiment, its works beautifully. Many of the compositions look like old engravings - especially a lovely shot of a couple of riders reining in their horses to cheer the steam-boats. Quite incidentally, a few shots from the steamboat sequences come from Ford's 1923 silent "Cameo Kirby" -- but so superior was the photography in that original film, and so meticulously has Ford recreated the same period, that the shots can exist side by side without the use of stock footage being in the least bit apparent.

Curiously (though in later years, Ford's cranky evaluations of his earlier work was often unreliable) Ford now professes to be unhappy with the final form of "Steamboat Round the Bend", and claims that changing studio policy at the time of production brought about the excision of "all the comedy". The film does show signs of pre-release cutting; important sequences such as the trial are not shown and merely talked about after the event. But it is hard to imagine the comedic content having been tampered with - or the film being the better for more of it. It is the comedy element that is the film's biggest surprise and joy, for too often with Ford his comedy has been low and obtrusive slapstick. Here however his affection for the subject seems to spill over into his treatment of the characters. Berton Churchill as the New Moses, a religious charlatan, creates a classic comedy figure in the W.C. Fields vein, but with an individuality and a kind of pompous integrity which makes it far from mere imitation Fields. And Stepin Fetchit as the lazy, unintelligible Negro handyman finally going berserk at the sight of timeless lyrics to a wheezy calypso - is so hilarious, even if one never knows what he is saying, that one really feels for the TV audiences that must miss so many of his best scenes because of the current feeling against racial stereotypes. (I wonder how many TV stations leave intact the scene where Berton Churchill tries to stuff him into a blazing furnace, thinking he's a wax figure of Uncle Tom?) And there's another of Francis Ford's lovable, raffish, drunken derelicts too. Altogether, "Steamboat Round the Bend" is a nostalgic and sentimental delight. (Who but Ford would dare call his heroine "Fleetybelle" in the tough and bittle thirties?) In addition, it is one of those flawlessly constructed films that starts well and gets better as it goes along.

Prior to the screening, we will be showing a brief excerpt from a filmed interview with Ford (the original runs for some 100 minutes) in which he talks about Rogers and this film in particular.

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William K. Everson

Next week:
"SKINNER'S DRESS SUIT" (1926), a delightful, flavorsome silent comedy directed by William Seiter, with Reginald Denny and Laura LaPlante; and
"THE GOOD FAIRY" (1935); Molnar adapted by Preston Sturges and directed by William Wyler; a handsome romantic comedy with Margaret Sullivan, Herbert Marshall, Frank Morgan and Reginald Owen.

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