"Cimarron" is a film that will almost certainly either fall short of your expectations, or possibly exceed them, but in either case is unlikely to be quite as thrilling you expect from a near-legendary film, lost for years, it will inevitably disappoint those who are expecting both a giant Western epic and an equally giant-sized emotional drama. On the other hand, many of us (myself included), knowing that RKO Radio was at that time a very prosaic studio geared mainly to drawing room dramas and stage or novel derivations, that Wesley Ruggles was generally a second-rate director (whose best films are vehicles for such director-immune personalities as Barrymore and Davis) and that Edna Ferber could do better maulin and artificial today, were expecting little more than a somewhat archaic milestone of film history of no great permanent value. And it is a good deal better than that.

Of course, it has a certain disadvantage in shooting it with the big-scale landrush sequence in the very first scene, and never again coming up with anything to equal it visually. It is a fault shared (like many other degrees, by Show Boat) in its best songs into its first two reels, and then rations the others out rather severely. "Ben Hur" (which uses its huge chariot race as the climax to the first half) and most of all by another early RKO Radio Richard Dix vehicle, "Deluge", which opened up with a spectacular depiction of the total destruction of New York by tidal wave - and spent the rest of the picture with a handful of survivors wandering around the woods! However - while it may well be hindsight to suggest this - it seems that RKO were aware of the problem, and deliberately tried to downplay one of the excitement of the land rush sequence. It is big, spectacular and certainly impressive - but it is handled in an impersonal, almost documental manner, with no attempt to build the thrill via individual heroics, wagon crashes or other stunt work. (The similar sequence in the smoother but less impressive remake with Glenn Ford, just 30 years later, was a stunt man's circus!) Thus as a landrush sequence, it has neither the excitement nor the poetry of Hart's landrush in "Tumbleweeds" or John Ford's in "The Three Bad Men" - but since it is an establishing rather than a climactic sequence, it hardly needs those qualities.

One of the brief cycle of big Westerns that hit the screen with the early talkies (some of them exploiting the wide-screen too), "Cimarron" is admittedly not as good as "The Big Trail" (Walsh) or "Billy the Kid" - but it is a good deal better than "In Old Arizona" or "The Virginian". Edna Ferber's episodic novel simplified the job of the scenarist (a new and unfamiliar craft when the talkies replaced the silent) in that he could set the Montes to music and rearange - but didn't have to "interpret" or find a way of translating dialogue into visual terms. There is a good deal of dialogue in "Cimarron", but it is fairly terse and to the point, and there are no endless talk-set-pieces as there were in so many early sound films. The episodic nature of the tale is a little wearying at times, but mainly because after the hideous idol "Pal" and the mentally exhausting journeys through the decades in "Come And Get It" and "Shanghai Express" we have our first chance to have more than it actually is. Richard Dix's over-forceful and tableau-like performance does however suffer a little from subtleties and motivations that are missing. Where the film gains immeasurably though is in its great surface realism: no studio "exteriors", and a real sense of time and place, with a constant sense of people and horses moving outside windows, doors, across the street. A sense of progress and the passage of time is achieved through the town itself, and apart from some skillful glass shots in the long shots of the town, it all looks - and is - the real thing. It's a long film, but not a slow one, its only major drawback the rather harsh print and sound quality, unavoidable due to the limited surviving material.

-- W.K.Everson--