Two Off-beat Westerns

STRANGER AT MY DOOR (Republic, 1955) Directed by William Witney; story and screenplay, Barry Shipman; Camera, Bud Thackery; Associate Producer, Sidney Picker; 80 mins.

With MacDonald Carey (Holli Jarret); Patricia Medina (Pat Jarret); Skip Homeier (Clay Anderson); Stephen Wootton (Dodie); Louis Jean Heydt (John Tatum); Howard Wright (Doc Parks); Slim Pickens (Ben Silas); Malcolm Atterbury (Rev.Hastings); Paul Burns (Old-timer); Virginia Carroll (Sarah Tatum); Nancy Howard (Martha Griswell); Helen Wallace (Mrs Griswell); Saddler (Peter Brocco); Bernadette Winters (Betsy); Tom Black (Sam Black)

Apart from Jacques Tourner's "Stars in my Crown", one really has to go back to the silent period and some of the Westerns of William S. Hart to find such a successful blending combination of action, emotion and mildly stressed religion. William Witney was the dream of Republic's action directors starting out as an editor, promoted to director at the age of 21 in 1937, and thereafter a specialist in westerns and serials. He was a skilled writer too, and often branched out into "A" films in his later years, but "Stranger at my Door" was a relaxed film (especially by Republic standards) and a personal one, quite certainly his own favorite. It was Witney's action serials, and most specifically "The Perils of Nyoka", that were to be such a strong influence on Spielberg's Indiana Jones films. Witney's major contribution to the Western and serial genres was in breaking up and fragmentising the action, creating in a sense mosaics of action, short scenes, varied angles, superbly choreographed stunt work. Typical in this film is its action highlight, where the horse goes on a rampage. Shooting of this key sequence was extended over the film's entire schedule, being done only in the morning and late in the afternoon, when the horses were rested. (A horse owned by James Cagney was the "star" of these scenes, but there were many horse-doubles for the individual bits of action, as well as Roy Rogers' double stunting for Carey). Gregory Peck's fight with the invisible Indian in "The Sun" quite pales beside this incredible episode, in which cunning editing, clever suggestion and the use of prop hooves, a dummy dog and other tricks suggest that you have seen far more than you actually have. Had this sequence been shot by a big prestige director, it would have been famous immediately; as it is, while the film was popular with audiences, Republic didn't push it, and all too few critics ever got to see it. Quite apart from its action highlights however, it is a pleasing, sincere little film, not really about very much and with a theme rather than a plot. It was shot in just a couple of weeks in an area some 50 miles out of Hollywood - 30 years ago still virtual wilderness, now covered with mobile home camps, shopping malls and golf-courses!

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

TRAIL OF THE VIGILANTEs (Universal, 1940) Directed by Allan Dwan; Original screenplay by Harold Shumate; Camera, Joseph Valentine, Milton Krasner; Music, Mac J. Salter; Associate Director, Vernon Keays; 75 mins.

With Franchot Tone ("Kansas" Tim Mason); Warren William (Dawson); Peggy Moran (Barbara Thornton); Broderick Crawford (Swannee); Andy Devine (Meadows); Masha Auer (Boling); Preston Foster (Preston); Paul Fix (Hall (Sheriff)); Charles Trowbridge (John Thornton); Paul Fix (Lefty); Harry Cording (Phil); Max Wagner (Joe); Earl Hodgins (Medicine Show man); Vic Peltol (Conductor); and George Chandler, Edmund Cobb, Frank Browlee, Bob McKenzie, Lew Kelly, Ralph Dunn, Duke York, Ray Teal, Ted Adams, Lloyd Ingraham, George MacQuarrie, Hank Bell, Heinie Conklin, Bob Reeves, Bob Burns, Jim Corey, Jack Casey.

In recent years it has been the fashion, especially among writers on the belovedly-recognised talents of Allan Dwan, to claim that "Trail of the Vigilante" started out as a serious film and that, realising how formulaised it was, Dwan decided to switch horses in mid-stream and turn it into a comedy. This seems an extremely unlikely premise and also an impractical one, since the writing is done in a light vein, and the casting designed to utilise ensemble playing - elements that would have had to be changed (at increase in budget, samll shooting schedules) if the directorial stance was to be changed. (Such a change often happens in the advertising - as with "Cat Ballou", which was somewhat of a misfire and salvaged by claiming purely satiric intent - but rarely with a film in production.) Moreover, such a claim short-changes Dwan's achievements in creating a film that worked both as a comedy and as an action film. Mixing traditional styles like that usually is disastrous, and the films that succeed (the British "Bulldog Jack" and the American "Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back" are two that did) are few and far between. While "Vigilante" is certainly no overwhelming in its comedy material, "Trail of the Vigilantes" most certainly be considered a major success in the then very rare forays into western spoofing, and is equally certainly superior to such later and more ambitious works as "Blazing Saddles". Further underlining that its satiric thrust must have been pre-planned is the fact that Allan Dwan (not a Universal contract director) was assigned to direct, and had only the previous year made the first real spoof of the swashbuckler in the Ritz Brothers' "The Three Musketeers", a much under-rated comedy, and had
followed it up with a horror spoof, "The Gorilla". Finally, the film wasn't of sufficient importance to rate an in-production change of status, its mere programmer status undeterred by the lack of a "name" leading lady (though there need be no apologies for the presence of the charming Peggy Moran) and economies which extended to a musical score pillaged from "Destry Rides Again" and "Winners of the West", and an opening montage composed mainly of stock riding scenes from the old Ken Maynard "Smoking Guns" and the only just released "Diamond Frontier". Although the big new Western cycle was well under way by the end of 1940 when "Trail of the Vigilantes" was released, Universal's only major contribution to it had been "When the Daltons Rode" earlier that year. Clearly "Trail..." was a carefully conceived plan to cash in on both that, and also on the light, tongue-in-cheek format established by "My Little Chickadee", "Destry Rides Again" and the non-western "Seven Sinners".

There is considerable subtlety in the way the spoofing is pulled off. For one thing, the villains - headed by Warren William - are played straight, their apparent omnipotence strengthened by the ineptitude and inexperience of the heroes. And dialogue kidding western traditions is slipped in quite unobtrusively, and never underlined. The second half of the film contains a great deal of action and stuntwork, and Universal's expertise in staging fast chase scenes is well in evidence. Incidentally, just as the horse-falls in 1936's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" were instrumental in bringing about reforms and more humane methods of staging those falls, so was "Trail of the Vigilantes'" somewhat more realistic and less dangerous "stunt" leading lady upgrading of salary scales and union regulations relating to stuntmen. Tom Steele (doubling especially for Warren William) is the leader of the crew of stuntmen employed on this film.

Unpretentious, unspectacular, yet managing to look bigger and more expensive than it probably was, "Trail of the Vigilantes" is a most enjoyable minor "A". In Britain especially it was very popular, and played top of the bill on the huge Odeon circuit. Incidentally, a number of players who were listed in the original, pre-release cast list (and are not in the film's on-screen credits) do not appear in the film, indicating that it was cut down quite a bit to produce its current fast and zippy pace.

--- William K. Everson ---

Program ends approx. 10.22.
Discussion period follows.

Please note: the only available prints on "Trail of the Vigilantes" are those made up for a European tv sale, and rather curiously have a silent main title. Sound however returns with a vengeance for the balance of the credits.