

Regeneration

By Marilyn Ann Moss

One of the most beloved directors of classic Hollywood cinema, Raoul Walsh began his career in 1913 as an actor with the Pathe Brothers studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey. He quickly moved to Biograph Studios, where he began directing alongside the Father of American Cinema, the great D.W. Griffith. Walsh appeared as John Wilkes Booth in "The Birth of a Nation" (1915) and also assisted Griffith by filming the picture's battle scenes.



Rockliffe Fellowes as Owen Conway is transformed from Bowery tough guy to responsible citizen by love for Marie (Anna Q. Nilsson).

Impressed with Walsh's work for Griffith, up-and-coming studio mogul William Fox pirated Walsh away from Griffith in 1915 and gave Walsh his first chance to direct on his own. What a feature debut it was: the epic film, "Regeneration."

"Regeneration," thought to be the first feature-length gangster film produced in American cinema, premiered in the U.S. in 1915. Its reputation flourishes even today. Critics and moviegoers alike agree that with this film, Walsh quickly surpassed the directorial prowess of his mentor, D.W. Griffith.

Walsh could not have found better material for his first solo outing as a director than with the story he had in "Regeneration." The tale of a rough-and-tumble young man who lives in the Bowery mirrored almost uncannily the adventures Raoul Walsh and his George dreamed up about that area when they were kids. Born in Manhattan and being privileged as they were, they could not have really understood a life lived in the Bowery, but now Walsh had the opportunity to flesh out the imagined narratives he had cooked up long ago. As a director, as a human being, he needed to demonstrate the extent of his sympathies for strangers so as to tell a compelling story about a world he only half knew.

"Regeneration" is based on Owen Kildare's popular "autobiography" of that day, *My Mamie Rose*, which recounts the author's (now the protagonist named Owen) harrowed life in the Bowery. Orphaned in childhood, Owen grows to manhood only to become "a beer slinger and a pugilist in a tough Bowery dive," by necessity a man "whose fighting capacity and brutishness made him a bouncer in one of the

most infamous New York has ever known." When he meets a young woman, Mamie Rose (who becomes Marie in Walsh's film), Owen steadily transforms himself into a caring, responsible human being. Eventually he and Mamie Rose are to be married, but, tragically, she dies of pneumonia just before the wedding. Nevertheless, she has changed Owen's life forever.

Kildare's characters hungered even more than the aches in their stomachs; despair mapped the days of their lives. The book sold well, even garnering a theatrical adaptation that opened in New York City on September 1, 1908.

Walsh tooled the script with his close friend, Carl Harbaugh. "Regeneration" is rife with the dramatic elements that pleased audiences of early cinema—violence and redemption, heavy sentiment, romance and tragedy. Walsh knew Kildare from the inside—at least in his storytelling intellect—his camera pointed always on Kildare's tenement culture, capturing and closing in on men and women so hungry in body and soul, so long living in emotional and physical impoverishment, that to grab a necessity when it came along was everyday fare.

Walsh found a leading man, Rockliffe Fellowes, who had great charisma, taking audiences on a roller-coaster ride of emotions—menacing one minute, heartbreaking the next. Fellowes's boyish good looks provide Walsh's camera with a love object that could carry a feature-length picture. No less

affecting is Anna Q. Nilsson, a popular actress of the day, who plays Marie, the woman who abandons her upper-class roots to work in a settlement house and reach out to the needy. Nilsson has the earthiness and the gentleness to appear at once enticing and maternal, a woman Walsh and his camera blatantly adore. Her death is a shocking moment in the film, leaving audiences feeling as if the world has suddenly darkened.

“Regeneration” was an auspicious moment in young Walsh’s career as a director. The film is more artful than he would ever admit, especially with its harrowing close-ups, its painterly mise-en-scènes, and its concise, fast-moving storytelling. If nothing else, the picture displays a great range of technical know-how and storytelling conceits, showing that Walsh had been paying close attention to Griffith. Yet much more than technical brilliance is on display in “Regeneration,” more than simply the display of a young filmmaker’s innate awareness of the camera. The film shows Walsh getting inside the material, finding the interior terror in his characters’ lives; his actors, especially Fellowes, have a look of desperation and yearning on their faces, rendering them three-dimensional souls who chip away at any complacency the spectator might bring to the experience.

Yet, at such an early time in Walsh’s career, this film initiates a conscious decision on Walsh’s part to invent the persona of an artist claiming he is not an artist at all. While movies were not yet viewed as a serious art form, as they would be later in the twentieth century—Walsh and many of his fellow directors often ignored gathering theoretical and aesthetic discussions of their work—Walsh no doubt had a self-consciousness about what he was doing, an awareness that there was an artfulness on some level to the way a scene or a shot—or an emotion—played out on film. Later in his career, as he chose material sometimes far inferior to his talents, he could certainly disclaim any artfulness at work in some of his pictures. But, at the time of this picture, his material was stirring, and he merged his finely tuned sensibility to it. Still, he disclaimed it. If he called himself a storyteller, that was fine. But he claimed nothing more. When he took a chance four years later, and adapted Longfellow’s poem, *Evangeline*, for the

screen and called it poetry, he was stunned at the film’s public failure. He vowed never to direct an “artistic” film again.

But, for now, when “Regeneration” opened on September 13, 1915, to critical and box-office success, he never talked about art. He talked about the picture as a project that he needed to complete on schedule. If there was a humorous moment during the shoot, he might talk about that. In talking about “Regeneration,” Walsh always chose to focus on the excitement of the production itself and little more.

“Regeneration” was the first collaboration between Walsh and the brilliant French cinematographer Georges Benoit, newly arrived from Paris and also making his first Fox picture. The two men worked together over the next few years and between them produced stark yet lyrical images in such pictures as “Carmen,” “Blue Blood and Red” and the now (tragically) lost “The Honor System.”

William Fox was so taken with the box-office success of “Regeneration” that he bought Walsh a Simplex automobile and raised his salary to \$800 per week. Walsh now entered a period of his career where he produced a virtual feast of riches at Fox, but he was still hard-pressed to concede that he had the artist in him. He was making a noise at the studio and was off to a long, stellar career as a Hollywood director.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Marilyn Ann Moss, a film historian, is the author of two well-received director biographies: Raoul Walsh: The True Adventures of Hollywood's Legendary Director (2011) and Giant: George Stevens, A Life on Film (2004). She has just completed a documentary on Raoul Walsh: The True Adventures of Raoul Walsh: Hollywood's Legendary Director. She holds a Ph.D in literature and film from the University of California and was a film and television critic for The Hollywood Reporter from 1995 to 2009. She also has co-curated retrospectives and spoken on Walsh at UCLA, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and at Turner Classic Movies' Film Festival in Hollywood.