

Stagecoach

By Scott Allen Nollen

Orson Welles, who named John Ford as his favorite filmmaker, claimed that he studied "Stagecoach," "over forty times" before directing his innovative cinematic debut "Citizen Kane" (1941). This assertion vividly illustrates the impact of "Stagecoach," a film historically, culturally and aesthetically significant.

Mentored by his actor-director brother, Francis, and actor Harry Carey, and absorbing the films of D. W. Griffith, John Ford helped develop the language and techniques of the cinema, but he also imbued it with much of its heart and soul.

Even his most consciously stylized projects support his maxim that the reason for making a film is to "tell a damn good story."

While still making his way through "The Hurricane" (1937) for Samuel Goldwyn, Ford bought the film rights to "Stage to Lordsburg," a story by Ernest Haycox published in "Colliers" magazine. (Ford rightly claimed that Haycox had based "Lordsburg" on Guy de Maupassant's famous short story "Boule de Suif," which is set during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.)

Ford hadn't made a Western in over a decade, and was itching to direct an A film that would bring respectability back to a genre that long had been relegated to B status. Its eventual critical and commercial success literally revitalized a historically inspired genre invented in the United States.

Conferring with screenwriter Dudley Nichols, Ford began to develop a script that added depth to the diverse group of characters thrown together in a stagecoach traveling through the New Mexico Territory rife with Apaches. They transformed the central character, the gunslinger "Malpais Bill," into a more laudable, environmentally scarred outlaw known as "The Ringo Kid." Believing that their economical, exciting script had solid box-office potential, Ford was abruptly given the bum's rush by five



Mrs. Mallory (Louise Platt) confers with the cantina operator (Chris-Pin Martin), under the watchful eye of the other passengers, played by John Carradine, Donald Meek, Claire Trevor and John Wayne, as well as the stagecoach driver (Andy Devine) and marshal (George Bancroft). Courtesy Library of Congress

studio bosses, including 20th Century-Fox's Darryl F. Zanuck, who wouldn't even read it.

Ford finally managed to find a buyer: independent producer Walter Wanger, an outspoken liberal fond of "message" films, who owed a picture to United Artists. The distributor, however, didn't match the producer's enthusiasm, allocating only \$392,000 to a lowly Western retitled *Stagecoach*. With only \$65,000 allotted to the entire cast, Ford realized he'd have to talk some of his favorite actors into accepting less than usual.

An essential aspect of Ford's filmmaking brilliance was casting, and he managed to snag some prodigious talent: Claire Trevor as the female lead, Dallas, a shunned prostitute; Thomas Mitchell as "Doc" Boone, a variation on his alcoholic physician in "The Hurricane;" John Carradine as Hatfield, a gambler who attempts to impersonate a gentleman; Louise Platt as Lucy Mallory, a "respectable" (and pregnant) married lady; old, reliable George Bancroft as Marshal Curley Wilcox; Berton Churchill as Gatewood, a slimy, embezzling banker; and the terminally laryngitic Andy Devine as Buck, the constantly complaining stage driver.

Regardless of producers' daydreams about bankable major stars like Gary Cooper, Ford knew who would play the Ringo Kid from the time he began working on the script, a young man who had learned the basics in cinematic "boot

camp” for nearly a decade at Poverty Row studios like Mascot, Monogram and Republic: John Wayne. Although he levied doses of his trademark abuse upon “The Duke,” Ford loved him, and Wayne always viewed his “Coach” as a mentor, counselor and father figure. Ford had seen flashes of brilliance in his unadorned, naturalistic acting style, and thought he glided his 6’4” body “like a dancer.” Ford also had to be rather fierce when standing up to Walter Wanger, insisting that Wayne was his *only* choice for the lead role.

Ford had chosen to spend the budgeted location funds in one of the most rugged spots in the Southwest: Monument Valley, a desert region distinguished by breathtaking sandstone monoliths providing endless visual possibilities for the man “who painted with a camera.” Located on the Navaho reservation in southern Utah and northern Arizona, Monument Valley was accessible only by driving from Flagstaff over 200 miles of rutted dirt roads. The area not only lacked bridges, but all forms of modern communication. Ford was blazing a new trail into a sunbaked, brutal environment. The miserable poverty and living conditions Ford witnessed at the reservation induced him to hire hundreds of Navahos (at \$3.00 per day) to work with the crew, play bit parts and appear as extras in the action scenes.

Three weeks into the “Stagecoach” shoot, Wayne, highlighted by cinematographer Bert Glennon’s atmospheric close-ups, was giving the kind of performance “Pappy” Ford knew had always been inside that tall dancer. The Ringo Kid isn’t just a typical Western gunslinger seeking vengeance; he’s a fully realized character, descended from the William S. Hart and Harry Carey “good bad man,” and brought to life by Wayne’s unique blend of sincere respect, bashfulness, straight-shooting honesty, and that indefinable quality called charisma.

“Stagecoach” provided a glimpse of the Wayne cinematic character that later would emerge with a vengeance: the solitary individual who believes in the “justice” of civilization, but ultimately can’t subject himself to it. Like the Ringo Kid, the later Wayne characters accept justice, as long as it is defined by their own codes of conduct. *Stagecoach*, based on a work of literature and imbued with the visual expressionism that Ford had brought to “Pilgrimage” (1933), “The Informer” (1935) and “The Prisoner of Shark Island” (1936), revived and redefined the Western genre. In John Wayne, it also helped create one of the most popular and, ultimately, socio-politically influential icons in United States culture.

“Stagecoach” was previewed in Westwood on February 2, 1939. Wayne, who had been told by Ford, “You may get some real parts from this one...you’re actually going to have to go out and buy some clothes,” was in attendance at the Village Theater, where the audience gave “Stagecoach” a standing ovation.

United Artists released the film on March 3, and Ford’s boast to Walter Wanger was quickly transformed into truth. The public turned out in droves, and the critical reception included such superlatives as “the best Western in years” and “rare screen masterpiece.” Ford received the best director award from the New York Film Critics, and Thomas Mitchell and composer Richard Hageman won Academy Awards at the February 29, 1940, ceremony at the Coconut Grove.

The plethora of high-budget Westerns that followed in its wake would include some of Ford’s own most historically inspired and personal projects: “My Darling Clementine” (1946), his informal “cavalry trilogy”—“Fort Apache” (1948), “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon” (1949) and “Rio Grande” (1950)—“The Searchers” (1956), considered one of the finest of all American films, and “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” (1962). The director who “cut his teeth” making Westerns during the late 1910s would now go on to explore, expose and transmute the mythology of the American West, ultimately attempting, in “Cheyenne Autumn” (1964), to create a cinematic “apology” to the Native Americans first depicted as stereotypical savages in “Stagecoach.”

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

Educated in film and history at the University of Iowa, Scott Allen Nollen served as an archivist for the State Historical Society of Iowa and the National Archives and Records Administration. From a young age, he developed skills as a writer, filmmaker and musician, and published his first book in 1989. He has written and edited over 40 volumes on film, literature and popular music, and has been widely recognized for his work on Boris Karloff, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Frank Sinatra, Paul Robeson and John Ford. He has lectured extensively, and currently contributes to many online panels and the program “Sinatra: The Man and the Music” for Hawaii Public Radio.