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THE TEXAS RANGERS (Paramount, 1936) Directed by King Vidor; Screenplay by Louis Stevens from a story by King Vidor and Elizabeth Hill, based on material in Walter Prescott Webb's book "The Texas Rangers"; Camera, Edward Cronjager. 93 mins.

With: Fred MacMurray (Jim Hawkins); Jack Oakie (Wahoo Jones); Jean Parker (Aranda Bailey); Lloyd Nolan (Sam McGee); Edward Ellis (Major Bailey);

Bennie Bartlett (David); Frank Shannon (Captain Stafford); Frank Cordell (Ranger Ditson); Richard Carle (Casper Johnson); Jed Preuty (District Attorney Twitchell); Fred Kohler sr. (Higgins); George Hayes (Judge); James Mason, Stanley Andrews (Higgins' henchmen); Hank Bell (Hank); Jee Rickson, Neal Hart, Gov. Clyde Tingley of New Mexico (Rangers); Charles Middleton (Lawyer); Irving Bacon (David's father); Mrs Bartlett (David's mother); Harrison Greene, Rhea Mitchell (Stagecoach passengers); Spencer Charters (Sheriff); Dell Henderson (town spokesman); Nelson McDewall (stage passenger)

Between "Cimarron" (1931) and "Stagecoach" (1939) the big-scale western and the epic entered into a period of virtual banishment. The early talkies had not been particularly successful, the feeling was that the Western was old-hat, and that the rapidly expanding market for the "B" westerns with Autry, Rogers, Boyd etc. made the bigger ones even more obsolete. Even the advent of Technicolor, while it bolstered the outdoor movies ("Trail of the Lonesome Pine", "Ramona", "God's Country and the Woman") did nothing to revive interest in the genre. The major companies virtually abandoned them, with the exception of the very occasional star vehicle like Wallace Beery's "The Bad Man of Brimstone". Paramount however, was a major exception to the rule. Not only had they made so many silent westerns that they were able to make quite classy "A" westerns built around stock footage from them ("The Texans" for example) but they also had Frank Lloyd, Cecil B. deMille and King Vidor under contract, directors noted for big-scale action films. DeMille offered "The Plainsman" and the much livelier "Union Pacific"; Lloyd came up with the very pedestrian "Wells Fargo", and Henry Hathaway, oddly enough, was given no western assignments at all. Vidor's "The Texas Rangers", made to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Texas' independence, was by far the best of the bunch and remains so.

It was criticised at the time for having a routine story, which perhaps it does, but Vidor was one of those directors who was never ashamed of the Western and loved the ingredients that had always made it so popular. "Wells Fargo" had been stifled by characters, costume, decor, drawing rooms and pomposity, only getting out of doors on rare occasions. "The Texas Rangers" however, seems to be almost entirely shot out of doors. There is a fairly obvious studio-created rock ledge at one point, and occasional back projection, but most of it (unlike the DeMille films in particular) keeps resolutely out of doors. Most of it was filmed in New Mexico, quite near Santa Fe, although there is some Texas location work too. The sense of space is impressive indeed, and through camera angling, stirring music and a succession of heroic if traditional images, Vidor (himself a Texan) keeps it all looking BIG even if the story-line itself is routine. It came some six years after his early sound classic "Billy the Kid", and ten years ahead of his post-war "Duel in the Sun". There were no other westerns for him in that period, unless one cheats geographically and includes "North West Passage". And the story-line, stereotyped as it may be, is still very largely a matter of incidents drawn from Texas Rangers records, some of which are still cited in the Rangers' promotional and institutional handbooks.

Unlike so many "A" westerns, "The Texas Rangers" is peopled by the "right" faces, many of them from "B" westerns (Fred Kohler, Hank Bell, Charles Middleton, George Hayes) and from silents (Neal Hart, Rhea Mitchell, James Mason). Even the Governor of New Mexico was pressed into service to play a ranger.

Curiously, the film is seldom shown now. The Museum of Modern Art used to run it quite regularly, but not any more, theatrical revivals have been nil, and tv exposure relatively sparse in recent years. Yet it is a film that holds up well, and is well-remembered (particularly for one specific scene which everybody who saw it in 1936 seems to identify it by). If it has a flaw at all, it is that the big action set-piece - the indian battle - occurs in the middle of the film, and while it keeps up a good pace, it doesn't build to an equally impressive climax -- although the final showdown and pursuit between MacMurray and Nolan is an interesting combination of camera movements and shots that Vidor included in his climactic stalkings in "Hallelujah" (1929) and "Duel in the Sun". Its unwitting racism might raise a few eyebrows today; indians are mowed down en masse, and when they come up with a particularly neat battle tactic, the Ranger captain growls "Only an Indian could think up a trick like that!" In later years Vidor felt (quite needlessly) rather guilty about all the indians he had massacred here and in "North West Passage", although it course then it was merely a plot cliché rather than a racial statement. The film was remade (rather poorly) in 1949 as "Streets of Laredo", and much footage from it turned up in later films ("Geronimo") and as background to the main titles in a modern western, "Texas Rangers Ride Again". ("The Texas Rangers" itself contains only one stock shot, from the silent "The Pony Express"). The stirring main title song was later used as the main title theme for many Hopalong Cassidy westerns and it's interesting that nobody gets star billing. --- W.K. LORRICK