

## Document Citation

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# The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

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## KING VIDOR

September 1 - November 13, 1972

Tuesday, October 17 (5:30)  
Thursday, October 19 (8:00)  
Friday, October 20 (2:00)

NORTHWEST PASSAGE. 1940. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Produced by Hunt Stromberg. Directed by King Vidor. Screenplay by Laurence Stallings, based on the novel by Kenneth Roberts (Book I - Rogers' Rangers; Book II was never filmed). Musical score by Herbert Stothart. Recording director: Douglas Shearer. Art director: Cedric Gibbons. Associate: Malcolm Brown. Set decorations by E. B. Willis. Make-up created by Jack Dawn. Directors of Photography: Sidney Wagner, William V. Skall. Technicolor color director: Natalie Kalmus. Associate: Henri Jaffa. Film editor: C. A. Nervig. Courtesy M-G-M. 126 minutes.

Cast: Spencer Tracy (Major Rogers), Robert Young (Langdon Towne), Walter Brennan ("Hunk" Marriner), Ruth Hussey (Elizabeth Browne), Nat Pendleton ("Cap" Huff), Louis Hector (Reverend Browne), Robert Barrat (Humphrey Towne), Lumsden Hare (Lord Amherst), Donald McBride (Sergeant McNott), Isabel Jewell (Jennie Coit), Douglas Walton (Lieut. Avery), Addison Richards (Lieut. Crofton), Hugh Sothorn (Jesse Beacham), Regis Toomey (Webster), Montague Love (Wiseman Clagett), Lester Matthews (Sam Livermore), Truman Bradley (Capt. Ogden), Andrew Pena (Konkapot).

"My first color film was NORTHWEST PASSAGE based on the book by Kenneth Roberts. Most of the scenes were about a group of rugged fighting men called Rogers' Rangers. The script called for the soldiers to be dressed in uniforms of an indeterminate green that would help conceal the men from their enemies' view as they walked or crawled through the mottled growth of the forest. When the production tests were made, I was surprised to see that what seemed an inoffensive shade to the eye appeared on the screen as a brilliant Kelly green. I consulted the Technicolor representative, pointing out the great change that had occurred in the costumes on the screen. He said that he was aware of it, but that the Technicolor process was similar to lithography; as for this particular green, it was one that Mr. Darryl Zanuck liked and had selected for one of his Twentieth Century-Fox productions. With some argument and persuasion we succeeded in getting the Technicolor company to mix up a new batch of green dye. I realized that the whole dramatic intent of a scene could, through the use of color, be heightened, diminished, or completely destroyed." -- King Vidor, King Vidor On Filmmaking (David McKay, 1972)

NORTHWEST PASSAGE was arguably Vidor's most successful film since THE CROWD. That is to say, it is almost as personal as HALLELUJAH and OUR DAILY BREAD, and it is as accomplished a piece of craftsmanship as SHOW PEOPLE and THE CITADEL. While M-G-M focused its attention on GONE WITH THE WIND, Vidor was brought in to salvage this two-year-old project. The resulting film is more authentic an epic than GONE WITH THE WIND, more creative in its use of color, and an infinitely more personal work of art.



18th Century America has rarely been used as a milieu for major films - it seems not to be a very commercial epoch. It took a Frenchman, Maurice Tourneur, to make the definitive such film in the silent era - THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS, a 1920 masterpiece heavily influenced by Griffithian stylistics. Griffith's own AMERICA is very similar in many ways to NORTHWEST PASSAGE, but it is weighed down by typically mediocre performances by Carol Dempster and Lionel Barrymore.

John Ford's DRUMS ALONG THE MOHAWK, made in color simultaneously with NORTHWEST PASSAGE, is also Ford's first color film and curiously similar to Vidor's. Ford here used both art director Richard Day and composer Alfred Newman, who had been Vidor regulars throughout the thirties. In fact, with NORTHWEST PASSAGE and DRUMS ALONG THE MOHAWK, Ford and Vidor's careers come closer together than at any time before or since.

Spencer Tracy's character is strikingly similar to Nathan Brittles, the John Wayne role in Ford's great SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON. The fact that Laurence Stallings contributed to both scripts makes this something more than a coincidence. The Robert Young character, the young aristocrat dabbling in war until it nearly kills him, is clearly John Gilbert in the Vidor/Stallings BIG PARADE two centuries removed. The interaction between these two favorite father figures of mid-century America (Tracy and Young) and Walter Brennan is obviously reminiscent of the camaraderie of THE BIG PARADE and subsequent Vidor films, most notably THE TEXAS RANGERS. The gap between the Texas Rangers and Rogers' Rangers, however, is enormous.

THE TEXAS RANGERS was a mediocre western with ambition to be more. NORTHWEST PASSAGE is a genuine epic with a forceful sweep and inevitability about it virtually unequalled since the end of the silent era. Vidor's brilliant use of color, his creation of a brown and green natural environment, was literally to set the tone for hundreds of outdoor films to follow. The color values of NORTHWEST PASSAGE are in striking contrast to the unfortunate visual quality of AN AMERICAN ROMANCE four years later where Vidor was much more subject to studio controls and the M-G-M concept of what a color film should be like. The sequence of the carnage in the Indian village is one of the most incredible examples of location shooting in any film. Whatever its moral and racist implications might be, it is undeniably an extraordinary piece of filmmaking.

The related themes of group solidarity and discipline which are so strong in OUR DAILY BREAD are also at the core of NORTHWEST PASSAGE. (In a sense this is not only Vidor's most Fordian film, but also his most Hawksian). The Rangers transcend their social and national differences, for example, because of their common purpose. They can only achieve this by disciplining themselves to cope with the most horrendous ordeals up to and including violent death. Major Rogers, autocratic and idealistic, is to the Rangers what John Sims was to the agrarian commune in OUR DAILY BREAD. He is a classic American hero, and NORTHWEST PASSAGE is a film worthy of him and of King Vidor.

-- Charles Silver