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THE LONG VOYAGE HOME (1940)

Ole Olson	John Wayne	Freda	Mildred Natwick
Driscoll	Thomas Mitchell	Axel	John Qualen
Smitty	Ian Hunter	Elena	Carmen Morales
Cocky	Barry Fitzgerald	Yank	Ward Bond
Captain	Wilfrid Lawson		

Adapted from four one-act plays by Eugene O'Neil by Dudley Nichols. Photography by Greg Toland. Film edited by Sherman Todd. Music by Richard Hageman. An Argosy-United Artists Production. Produced by Walter Wanger. Directed by John Ford.

The dramas of Eugene O'Neill have proved popular on the screen from the first filming of Anna Christie in 1923 by Thomas Ince with Blanche Sweet in the title role, right down to, one presumes, Long Day's Journey into Night which is currently before the cameras. In between these two films, one could find two more versions of Anna Christie, the most famous starring Garbo in her first sound picture; Strange Interlude, filmed in 1932 with Norma Shearer and Clark Gable; The Constant Woman (adapted from the one acter Recklessness) in 1933; The Emperor Jones saw the screen the same year with Paul Robeson in the title role; Ah, Wilderness! which appeared under that title in 1935 and as SUMMER HOLIDAY in 1947, this time a musical version; next came today's film, followed very shortly by Alfred Santell's peculiar version of The Hairy Ape (1944); the beautiful but little appreciated Mourning Becomes Electra (1947) directed by Dudley Nichols; and more recently one has seen Desire Under the Elms (1958).

While THE LONG VOYAGE HOME may not be the most successful of the O'Neill adaptions, it is certainly one of the most interesting. The four original plays were originally only slightly linked together when presented collectively under the title of S. S. Glencairn. From these dramas, Dudley Nichols fashioned a harsh and relentless script, that, while episodic, was both extremely cinematic and true to O'Neill at the same time. The film received one of the greatest build-ups ever given to a motion picture prior to its release. Two months before the premiere, producer Walter Wanger announced the first of thirty-five showings of paintings by nine leading artists (including Grant Wood) commissioned to the tune of $50,000 to paint their impressions of the forthcoming picture.

The elaborate publicity campaign was evidence that there was considerable worry about the non-conformist, episodic plot formation that obviously resulted from tacking together four separate plots. Director John Ford and scenarist Nichols had eliminated the necessity for the conventional dramatic build-up by emphasizing atmosphere and character, leading to an overall inconclusiveness in plot vaguely reminiscent of the Odyssey.

The film begins with The Moon of the Caribees (a sequence reportedly missing in television prints) which shows the departure of the S. S. Glencairn and its licentious crew and continues with Bound East for Cardiff, showing the hope of two sailors to give up the sea for farming, In the Zone, a study of sabotage, and winding-up with The Long Voyage Home, an episode of frustration and poignancy. The viewer is gradually introduced to the tough crew of the freighter, which makes its troubled way from the West Indies, via the United States, to England, very frail human beings guiding a rusty tub filled with ammunition. Only a few script changes were made: the time was updated to the (then) present, and the ending was slightly softened. Also, Nichols added a few quite effective episodes of which O'Neill apparently approved.

To give the film the real feel of the sea, a real freighter was rented at Wilmington Harbor, California. Under glowering skies and the ship's rusty plates, Greg Toland's camera recorded intimate details in a manner which he only surpassed in CITIZEN KANE (1941). In the opening sequence, an interesting pattern of light and shadow is combined with the sounds one would hear about a busy port, with dialogue tellingly absent. Richard Hageman's score is also uncommonly sensitive.

Being a true ensemble picture, it would be unfair to single out any of the fine cast, for each member seems an integral part of the machine. Rarely has such a uniformity of style been present in a Hollywood film.

The December 1940 issue of Theatre Arts summed up the Nichols-Ford-Wanger achievement: "Plays are supposed to make poor material for films. Their stage productions hang as a shadow over the film adaptors so that the result is often static, all talk and no action. What the film shows is that movie men with imagination, who can go back straight to the source from which the playwright drew, and can play their own understanding upon the original material as well as on the stage version, and then, most important of all, can transcribe that material into filmic terms, can make a great film."

David Stewart Hull