

## Document Citation

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Monday next, February 2nd: "MANHANDLED" (1925, dir: Allan Dwan) with Gloria Swanson, Tom Moore, Frank Morgan, Ian Keith, Lilyan Tashman, Ann Pennington; and "STUARTS IN EXILE" (1915, dir: James Young) with Clara Kimball Young, Montagu Love

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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THREE BAD MEN" (Fox, 1926) Produced and directed by John Ford  
Scenario by John Stone and John Ford, from the novel "Over the Border" by Herman Whittaker; Camera: George Schneiderman; Titles by Ralph Spence and Malcolm Stuart Boylan; location photography at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and in the Mojave Desert; Released, August 1926; 9 reels  
With: George O'Brien, Olive Borden, Lou Tellegen, Priscilla Bonner, Tom Santschi, J. Farrell MacDonald, Frank Campeau, Phyllis Haver, Otis Harlan, Alec B. Francis, Jay Hunt, George Harris, Walter Perry, Grace Gordon, George Irving, Vester Pegg, Bud Osborne.

There is always some initial confusion about "Three Bad Men", most people (understandably) mixing it up with the not dissimilar "Three Godfathers" by Peter B. Kyne. The Kyne story has been filmed at least five times, twice by Ford. "Three Bad Men" however, has been done only twice: this initial film by Ford, and a 1931 remake, "Not Exactly Gentlemen" (known in Europe as "Three Rogues"), directed by Ben Stoloff. It was a short, 5-reel picture, much simplified and with a more conventional climax, though borrowing liberally (as did other Fox theatrical and tv westerns) from Ford's landrush sequence. Victor McLaglen, Lew Cody and Eddie Gribbon were the badmen-heroes, Robert Warwick the villain, and Fay Wray the heroine. The George O'Brien role was reduced to a minor juvenile lead.

When I first saw "Three Badmen" in a Czech print two years ago I was quite bowled over by it, not least by its tautness, even though realising that this might be partly due to the fact that it was obviously a cut print. I assumed that continuity gaps were probably covered by the titling, which of course, being Czech, I couldn't read. The full and considerably longer version proves to lack some of that tautness, at least in the first half, and tends to be a bit leisurely at times; but there is an added bonus in the titles, which have both wit and a rugged kind of Robert Service poetry.

"Three Bad Men" is still quite a revelation, and one of Ford's major silents. Whereas the epic qualities of "The Iron Horse" were reduced by the "B" picture story-line, the simple (yet by no means programmer-level) story of "Three Bad Men" is elevated to epic status by using the opening of the West and the huge land-rush as a kind of panoramic background. What makes it so appealing is its fusing of two dynamic styles: its plot, characters, and the realistic, dusty milieu are pure Hart and Ince, with Tom Santschi a literal reincarnation of Bill Hart. Yet it is all slammed over with the showmanship and polish that one expects of Ford. The sentiment, the good-evil confrontation symbolised by the old Hart/Ince ruse of pitting the saloon against the church, are all good old-fashioned traditionalist ingredients, yet its film-making style is essentially modern, and the film doesn't really date at all. Oddly enough, even though it was very successful, it was Ford's last Western for 13 years; not until 1939 and "Stagecoach" did he return to the genre.

It was initially intended as a big co-starring special for Fox's Big Three in Westerns - Tom Mix, Buck Jones and George O'Brien. Inspired showmanship though that might have been however, it is to the film's benefit that it was finally made the way it was; Santschi, Campeau and MacDonald make a fine starring trio, with George O'Brien pushed into a decidedly secondary role. There are occasional examples of typical Fordian flaws; some of the comedy goes on too long, and once or twice there is a careless shot. In the landrush sequence for example, there is a shot of a baby being transferred from a rider to a wagon; presumably in order to protect the tot, the wagon and horse slow down to a walk - and so that everything will match up, the background riders slow down too. But it seems absurd to carp at such a minor weakness when the rest of that sequence (shot in a mere two days) is so spectacularly staged and beautifully shot. Ford has recalled that many veterans of the actual rush worked with him in that sequence. Once the melodrama and action begin to accumulate at the beginning of the second half, the film maintains a very brisk and powerful pace right up to the "Three Musketeers"-derived climax, and unlike so many big films of its day, it has the wit to then wrap itself up quickly and not dawdle over getting to the "End" title. The camerawork (and composition) are quite stunning throughout; beautifully designed exterior panoramas, and superbly lit interiors. The print, alas, isn't quite the thing of beauty that it should have been, but it is a two-fold improvement over the first print we received some weeks back. There, for example, the breathtaking opening shot (an iris of a tree being felled, opening out to reveal a whole panorama of the West) was so badly timed and over-bright that all the detail was lost; here, while the timing does not always do justice to Schneiderman's superb original camerawork, at least sufficient detail is there for one to visualise how beautiful it all looked in an original 35mm print.

--- William K. Everson ---