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"FOUR SONS" (Fox, 1928) Directed by John Ford

Scenario by Philip Klein, from "Grandma Bernie Learns Her Letters" by I.A.B. Wylie
Camera: George Seidenman, Charles G. Clarke; Music arranged by S.L. Rothafel;
Theme "Little Mother" by Eino Kapee and Lee Pollack; titles by Katherine
Milliker and H.H. Caldwell; 10 reels

With: Margaret Mann, James Hall, Francis X. Bushman Jr., George Meeker, Charles
Morton, June Collyer, Albert Gran, Earle Fox, Frank Reicher, Jack Perrink,
Archduke Leopold of Austria, Hughie Mack, Wendell Franklin, Auguste Toinaire,
Ruth Mix, Robert Parrish, Michael Mark, L.J. O'Connor, Ferdinand Schumann-Heink,
Harry Cording, Stanley Blystone, Joseph Girard.

"Four Sons" is that rarity, a John Ford film that is designed as an "art" and
"prestige" picture. It's the kind of a film that a director with Ford's flair
for warmth and spontaneity rarely pulls off well; he certainly failed badly on
"The Fugitive", though admittedly he succeeded equally spectacularly with "The
Long Voyage Home". "Four Sons" can't really be called a failure - financially it
was an enormous success, and created a permanent attendance record at the Roxy -
but somehow one feels it could have been a better picture with a different
director (Koyzage, obviously) - or if Ford himself had tended to take it less
seriously. The echoes of "Human" and "Sunrise" are everywhere - even literally,
since the same village set is re-used. But even though it was the fashion at the
time, accepted by critics and public alike, the deliberate slowness of pace
doesn't seem a happy method for Ford. One has the constant feeling that he wants
to throw in some lively bits of business, or some spectacular showmanship, and is
prevented from doing so out of respect for his material. The camerawork is
stunning, the gauze shots lovely, and yet it's neither a first-rate film nor
first-rate Ford. He was often careless with detail and it never seemed to matter,
yet here the costumes and cars for pre-World War One New York are so blatantly
late 20's that they really stick out like a sore thumb. And his German "types"
are either stereotypes, or his more familiar black-shawled Irishwomen trying to
look a bit Teutonic. It just isn't as moving as it should be, and one longs to
give Mama Bernie as vigorous a shaking as should have been inflicted on Bill
Barnes in "The Long Voyage Home". The film is a credit to the original, at least
the original scenario, which was a gem in a very
stylized, poetic, semi-symbolic-consciousness manner, much like the original
scenario for "Sunrise". I have read this scenario of Bing's (although, since it
was so thoroughly literate, it may have been a translation of an original German
treatment of his) and the pacing and mood of the film suggest that it was based
on that rather more than Klein's official and credited scenario. Quite
incidentally, John Wayne was a prop man on the film - and assistant director
Edward O'Keefe is, of course, Ford's brother. All in all, a fascinating and
off-beat Ford - but for a really magnificent and 100% successful venture into the
same genre, watch out for Ford's early talkie "Pilgrimage" (also from a Wylie
story) which will be running in January.

Wm. K. Everson