

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Fonda on Ford</b>
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Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	Spring 1973
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	85-86
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Lumet, Sidney (1924), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States Boyer, Charles (1897-1978), Figeac, France Wayne, John (1907-1979), Winterset, Iowa, United States Bogdanovich, Peter (1939), Kingston, New York, United States Ford, John (1894-1973), Cape Elizabeth, Maine, United States Plummer, Christopher (1929), Toronto, Ontario, Canada Fonda, Henry (1905-1982), Grand Island, Nebraska, United States
Film Subjects	Twelve angry men, , Stage struck, Lumet, Sidney, 1958 The streets of Laredo, , Liliom, Lang, Fritz, 1934 You only live once, Lang, Fritz, 1937

Mister Roberts, Ford, John, 1955



## Fonda on Ford

In Paris recently to make *Snake in the Grass* for Henri Verneuil with Yul Brynner, Dirk Bogarde and Farley Granger, Henry Fonda talked about his future plans. He has two immediate options: a film for Peter Bogdanovich, *The Streets of Laredo*, written by Larry McMurtry, and a just completed play by Edward Albee. Fonda likes the Bogdanovich script, but thought he would probably go for the play. 'Albee didn't write it for me, but he has announced through his producers that he would like Henry Fonda and Angela Lansbury. It's a two-character play. Now, you know, if that play is any good, you knock them right through the ceiling. If I like the Albee play, that's where I'm going to be.'

Theatre gives him a satisfaction he doesn't get from films, a sense of continuity. He compares the film and stage versions of *Mr. Roberts*. 'Over a period of six or sixteen weeks you come to work every day, you rehearse a little bit and it's done. That's your performance—each time the director says 'Print!'. For ever. It's locked in, it's frozen. And then somebody else puts it in the right continuity, puts music in back of it, and sends it out to Pittsburgh and Chicago and New York and Paris. And if the critics like it and your audience likes it, you're happy, thank you, you get awards, thank you, but you never played *Mr. Roberts* from beginning to end.'

The first time he did play it from beginning to end, in the theatre, was 'the most exciting night of my life, and I am sixty-seven and a half years old. I later did it for four years, and I was just as excited on the last night.' Fonda thinks *Twelve Angry Men*, with Sidney Lumet, was probably the nearest he got in films to the sense of satisfaction which he gets from a performance after weeks of rehearsal. 'Because we rehearsed that for two weeks, and had run-through performances. At the end of the two weeks we could have gone on the stage and done it in the theatre. Instead we went on to another stage, and went out of continuity, and shot it on film.'

Lumet, Fonda says, is 'an actor's director... who has total communication with an actor. Actors working with Lumet always feel that they have given their best performance. But this is not to say that John Ford hasn't got some of the best performances out of me, out of Duke Wayne, out of anybody you can think of—but in a totally different way. Ford is a director who doesn't talk very much. In fact, he shies away from it. If an



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actor comes to him and wants to talk about a scene, he will change the subject or tell him to shut up. He doesn't even talk to his assistants or his script supervisors. They never know what he is going to do next. But back inside, Ford is working all the time. He likes to be mysterious, he likes to be surprised, he does not like everybody to know what he is going to do next. He does it in his way.'

To illustrate the Ford method, Fonda describes a famous scene. 'Monument Valley has always got beautiful white clouds and blue sky, and those buttes up there. Ford is going to have five hundred cavalry coming over the horizon. And then the clouds come over, it gets dark and starts to rain, and the cameraman is stricken. You know, ready to cry because he has already seen that Oscar on his mantelpiece. But Ford just says, "Roll 'em, for Chrissakes!" So they roll 'em, and it's sensational.'

There was a moment on *Stage Struck* when Fonda passed on this experience. 'We were shooting in Central Park, and they were lining up a scene I have with Christopher Plummer. We broke for lunch, and when I came back it was snowing, great huge snowflakes, and the crew were all standing around wondering what to do because they had maybe four or five set-ups in this scene with complicated dolly shots. It would have taken the whole afternoon, and they weren't at all sure the snow would last. So I said "Let me give you a lesson from John Ford. Put your camera on a tripod and shoot it fast, with the snow, because it's great, the snowflakes come down and land in your eye and then melt. Cornflakes won't do that." Lumet looked at me and said, "Yeah!" and he put his camera on a tripod and shot the scene. It stopped snowing a little while after, but he had the scene with real snow. This is Ford.'

Fonda recalls another example of what he calls Ford's 'Irish luck'. Ford was on Midway during the

war as head of the Field Photographic Service. 'He happened to be there, just waking up in the morning, when the Japs struck Midway. He gets up, pulls on some clothes, and runs up to the roof, taking his little hand camera. Bombs are dropping, the Japanese planes are coming in, and a fuel dump that had been hit is belching flame and black smoke. He is photographing everything he can see. Suddenly two marines come out of the administration building with a flag—because it was still early in the morning and the flag hadn't been raised yet. The two marines tie the flag on and pull it up. In the background is flame and smoke, and the flag goes straight up, hanging limply. But when it reaches the top, as though Ford said "Hit the wind machines!", it suddenly billows out. You can't do this sort of thing twice. You

"shoot it" when it happens. Ford likes to do it on the first take. He gets the emotion of the first time.

'It was a love affair with Ford for years and years and years. He is not a well man today... but he's working on a project, working with a writer on a script, and he wants me to be in it. "Of course, Pappy, of course," I said. "When are you going to be ready?" Unfortunately, I suppose that it won't happen.'

Working with Lang, though, was 'a bad experience'. Fonda remembers a story Charles Boyer told him about working with Lang on *Liliom*. 'In the death scene, Boyer is laid out on the bed. His feet are bare, with no shoes or stockings on, and they are out of camera range. Lang is beside the camera and (Fonda imitates Boyer imitating Lang) he says: "Charles, when I pinch your toe, close your eyes; then when I pinch your toe again, open your eyes again..." This is not the way. I don't want to be told when to close my eyes and when to open them. But I must admit it is effective on the screen.

'Lang took a whole day to shoot a simple scene with Sylvia Sidney and me in *You Only Live Once*. It's the wedding supper, and the camera starts on an insert of the marriage certificate, then dollies back, sees the plates where we have finished our dinner, and finally sees us. The scene is what we say to each other, and Fritz was all day shooting it. He would dolly back and shoot, then he would stop and take the spoon from my dessert, move the ice-cream round a little bit and dirty the dish, and then he would do it again, dirtying her dish a little bit, and then do it again. Then he would move the cup this way and do it, then he would tilt the marriage certificate and do it. He would do it fifty-five times, he would stand and blow smoke into the scene or something. Now this is not im-

portant... this is not using an actor who's a human being, who has learned his craft, and who knows what to do. I have said it to Fritz Lang's face and I will say it to anybody: he is a great director, but he is not for me, he is not fun. You must know that I love to act, that I love to build a character and have it come out of me. I don't have to have somebody say, "Hank, when I pinch your toe..."'

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