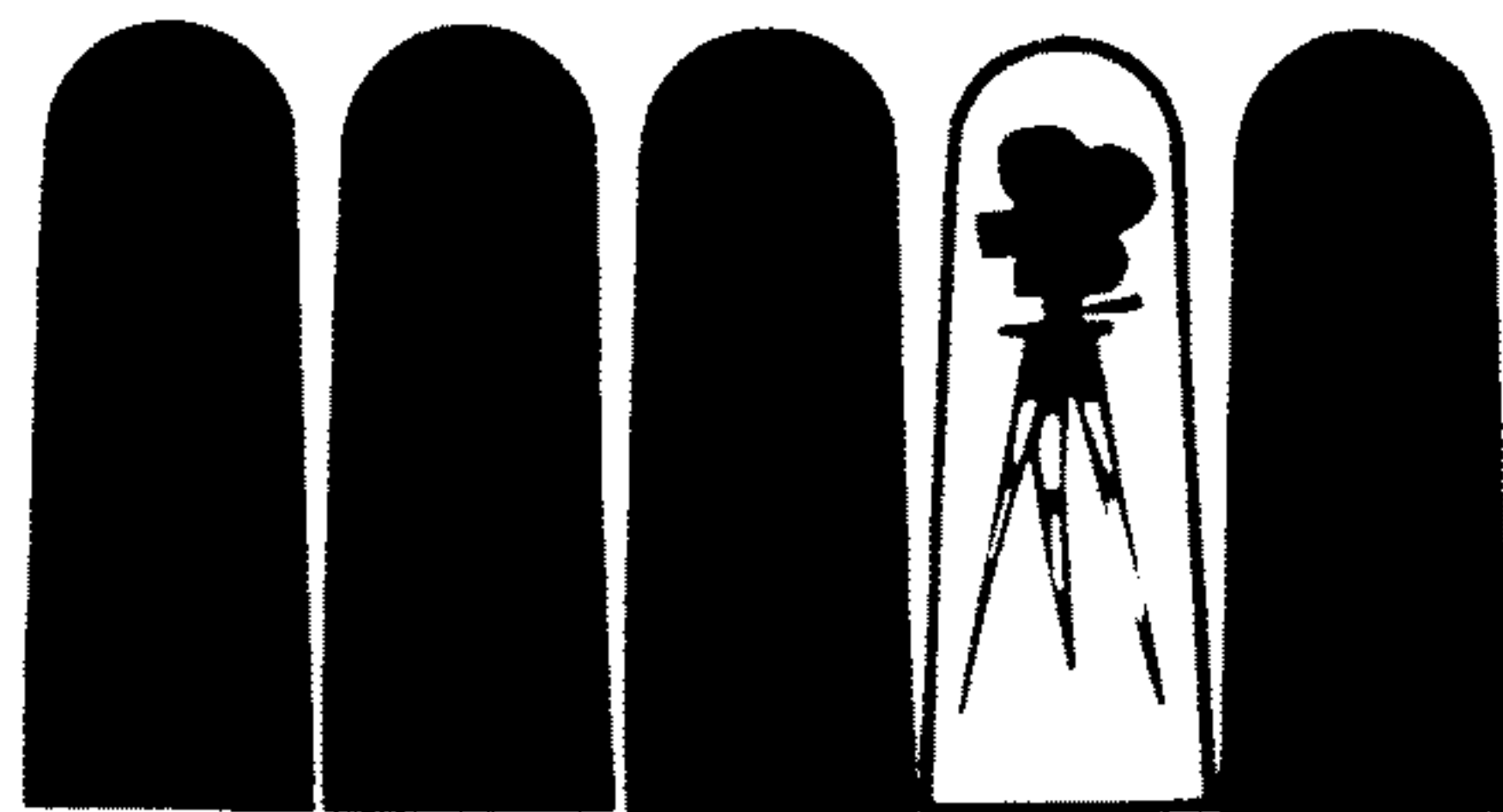


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THE DARTMOUTH



1962-1963

DAILY FILM PROGRAM

JOHNNY GUITAR (1954)

Vienna	Joan Crawford	Corey	Royal Dano
Johnny Guitar	Sterling Hayden	Marshall Williams	Frank Ferguson
Dancin' Kid	Scott Brady	Eddie	Paul Fix
Emma Small	Mercedes McCambridge	Turkey Ralston	Ben Cooper
McIvers	Ward Bond	Mr. Andrews	Rhys Williams
Old Tom	John Carradine	Pete	Ian MacDonald
Bart Lonergan	Ernest Borgnine		

Script by Philip Yordan from the novel of the same name by Roy Chansler. Photography in Truecolor, by Harry Stradling. Edited by Richard L. Van Enger. Art direction by James Sullivan. Music by Victor young. Song, "Johnny Guitar" by Peggy Lee and Victor Young, sung by Miss Lee. Produced and directed at Republic Studios by NICHOLAS RAY.

"JOHNNY GUITAR, in which Joan Crawford plays Vienna, the saloon owner who sits at her grand piano, dazzling in a white evening dress, while she waits for the lynching party, amuses director Nicholas Ray in recollection. It was 'baroque, very baroque.' If you're filming anything as bizarre as this story, of rivalry between Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge (her performance was 'straight sulphuric acid'), then there's no point in going less than all out."

From an interview with Nicholas Ray
in Sight and Sound 1961.

And go all out is just what director Nicholas Ray did. Representative of a kind of mad Western which existed for only a few years (another outstanding example is Ray's FORTY GUNS), JOHNNY GUITAR represents the limits to which a director-producer can cross a studio (and its star) and get away with it. The fact that Republic went out of business not long after this film is, perhaps, not exactly a coincidence.

What, then, makes JOHNNY GUITAR an outstanding film? The above description of Miss Crawford might give a clue. Nicholas Ray is one of the film world's great non-conformists. Faced with a script he doesn't like, he will do a few scenes with loving care and let the rest get by the best they can. Or, on the other hand, with a script he likes, even a horrible script, he can do the most remarkable, and sometimes disconcerting, things. Here's a case in point.

To call the script of this film idiotic would be a compliment. Certainly Ray, and probably everyone but Miss Crawford recognized this. So, it was decided to make the whole film a sort of "in-joke" in such a way that it would be excruciatingly funny to those who knew what was going on, but appear more or less normal (?) to the average viewer paying his seventy-five cents in Kansas.

And Mr. Ray got away with it, almost too well. He even succeeded in fooling the critics (for a real masterpiece of complete misunderstanding, we recommend the New York Times review) who couldn't make head or tail out of it.

Plot has never bothered Mr. Ray very much. His cause is much espoused by the group of young film critics whose concern is for form over content in film. In other words, it couldn't make less difference what the film is about if it is done with a style and method peculiar to the director. It is true then, that after absorbing the style of three or four Ray films, it is possible to identify some of his others without knowing he was the director.

Obscurity and a certain kind of quasi-surrealism have been milder traits in many Ray films, but in JOHNNY GUITAR he has let himself go with a vengeance. The viewer must not ask himself how that saloon was built in the middle of a desert on top of what appears to be an enormous rock outcropping, nor how they managed to carry a grand piano to it. These bits of fantasy are there to be enjoyed by the viewer because they are impossibilities. In case you don't get the point at first, there is also a sandstorm in broad sunlight at the start of the film. After that, you're on your own.

Favorite moments? Several bits are memorable. Joan, standing at the top of her saloon stairs, dressed in a costume that has to be seen to be believed remarking, "I'm not coming peaceably, marshall." Or, to quote one well known critic: "What are we to make of Emma, the fierce and brawling lady banker, with a pathological hatred of The Dancin' Kid -- he makes her feel like a woman, and she doesn't like it, so she wants to hang him," explains one of the posse-- and an even more vicious one of Vienna, which leads her to fire the gambling house, put the woman (who happens, at this moment, to be wearing a long white organdie dress) on a horse with hands tied behind her back, lead her to the noose, and have her whip in her hand the moment Johnny Guitar comes to the rescue? And what, too, of Vienna, who teeters ambivalently between a Hopalong Cassidy outfit and white organdie, conducts a love-hate war with her Johnny and shoots it out to the death with Emma?"

Here at last, is film which defies the efforts of audiences to make fun of something that is supposed to be serious; here, nothing is meant to be serious and any ensuing jokes and laughter on the part of the audience would delight the director.

One anecdote about the production is worth repeating. Somewhere along the line, it is told, Miss Crawford realized she wasn't getting star treatment and took it out on everyone in the cast and crew. On the other hand, the villain of the film, the lovely Mercedes McCambridge couldn't have been more friendly or cooperative. On the last day of shooting, Miss McCambridge received an ovation from the technicians on completion of her work. Miss Crawford, finishing a few hours later, was greeted with stony silence. In a rage, she stomped off the stage and set fire to her costume trailer. Or so the story goes. There ought to be more Joan Crawford in Hollywood. As Norma Desmond says in SUNSET BOULEVARD, "I'm still big...It's the pictures that have grown smaller." Miss Crawford, who made her first film in 1925 and is still growing strong, ought to agree.

D. S. H.

Some films of Nicholas Ray: THEY LIVE BY NIGHT (1948); THE LUSTY MEN (1952); RUN FOR COVER (1955); REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE (1955); THE JAMES BROTHERS (1956); BIGGER THAN LIFE (1956); PARTY GIRL (1958); WIND ACROSS THE EVERGLADES (1958); THE SAVAGE INNOCENTS (1959-1960); KING OF KINGS (1961); 55 DAYS AT PEKING (in progress).