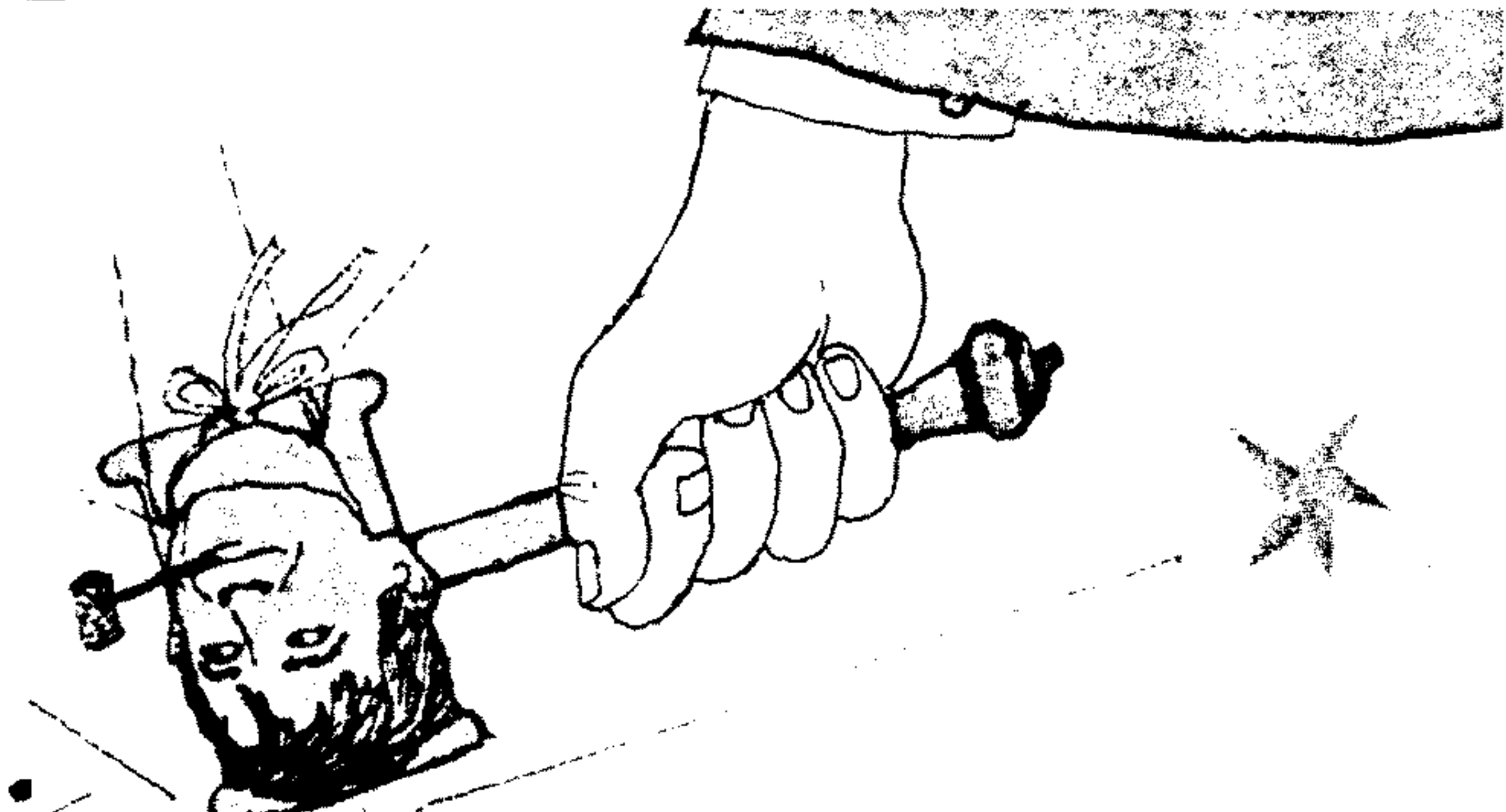


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JUDGE PRIEST

(U.S./1934) 76 minutes \$30.00

Directed by John Ford - Screenplay by Dudley Nichols and Lamar Trotti based on three short stories by Irvin S. Cobb, "A Treeful of Hoot Owls," "Brer Fox and the Briar Patch," and "Words and Music" - Cinematography by George Schneiderman - Sets Designed by William Darling - Music by Cyril J. Mockridge, conducted by Samuel Kaylin - Produced by Sol M. Wurtzel for the Fox Film Corporation. Players: Will Rogers, Tom Brown, Anita Louise, Henry B. Walthall, David Landau, Rochelle Hudson, Roger Imhof, Frank Melton, Charley Grapewin, Berton Churchill, Brenda Fowler, Francis Ford, Hattie McDaniel (McDaniel) and Lincoln Perry as "Stepin Fetchit."

This early John Ford sound film is the best example of Americana in our library; it is also a classic example of the naturalness and warmth that typified the work of Will Rogers. Rogers has such a way with his lines that they all seem to be ad lib Rogerisms, despite the fact that the talents of one of this country's greatest spinner of folksy tales (Irvin S. Cobb), together with the combined professionalism of screen writers Lamar Trotti and Dudley Nichols, lurked behind each line of dialogue and behind every one of Rogers' brilliant maneuvers (typified by his really clever manipulation of those attending the taffy pull).

In addition, Lincoln Perry ("Stepin Fetchit") and Hattie McDaniel (here as "McDaniels") appear in two strong supporting roles that have driven the NAACP up the proverbial wall in their latter-day outrage over black stereotypes, quite apart from the fact that both black and white audiences of the early thirties were uniformly delighted with both of them and the post-Civil War era in which the film is set would mitigate

against a benign tolerance of militant, proud blacks in Kentucky. Hattie McDaniel is obviously warming up for her role as "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*, which followed four-and-a-half years later. A close examination of the "Stepin Fetchit" character reveals an almost incredible artistry by Lincoln Perry that goes far beyond the more obvious foreground mannerisms of eye-rolling and foot-shuffling. As created in vaudeville and brought to the screen in the thirties, "Stepin Fetchit" is a man who is bone weary; each line he delivers becomes an almost impossible effort physically (indeed, on long lines, he lets his sentences end in an incoherent mumble as though he cannot summon the effort required to finish properly). Unlike Willie Best's later embarrassing portrayal of blacks in the "feets-don'-fail-me-now" school of stereotypes, Perry's "feets" have failed him long before his films begin. The characterization may be overdone (it is) and in this enlightened era may cause some irritation (it shouldn't), but it is Perry's own idea—not the director's—as it is carried on exactly thus through all his films.

The screenplay, drawn from three short stories by Cobb concerning the character of *Judge Priest*, is simplicity itself as far as the storyline goes, but incredibly complex insofar as it involves the character portrayals. Priest's nephew (Tom Brown) is in love with the girl next door (Anita Louise), who is spurned by the town and especially by Priest's (Rogers) snobbish sister (Brenda Fowler) because she had no legal father. The nephew is, in turn, pursued by the daughter (Rochelle Hudson) of the town's leading lawyer (Berton Churchill), who is after Priest's job as circuit judge. Into this bastion of Confederate hangers-on comes a mysterious stranger (David

Landau, so fine as the father in *Street Scene*) who, upon hearing Anita Louise's name slurred by the town barber, punches him in the nose. Later, the barber and two cronies lay for Landau, intending to beat him senseless with pool cues, but he defends himself against this Southern chivalry by drawing a knife and...

There is a trial in which Rogers pulls off his best scene when he surrenders the bench because Churchill accuses him of prejudice; the town minister (H.B. Walthall) appears with secret information about the stranger which endears him to the Confederate jury (meanwhile, as stage managed by Rogers, "Stepin Fetchit" and friends begin playing "Dixie" outside the courtroom at exactly the correct nostalgic time to help influence the jurors). Landau is not only exonerated, he is raised to hero status and as for poor, fatherless Anita Louise... well, you've probably guessed that part.

As "Juror No. 11," John Ford's brother Francis demonstrates that a Southern Gentleman can hit a spittoon at twenty paces, sober or not, and the climax of the film utilizes some well-integrated montage material for Civil War flashbacks; Ford pulls this off so adeptly that it is not immediately apparent that the montages are all from other films, not photographed specifically for this one.

William Darling's five sets manage to convey the atmosphere of the town without the camera ever wandering off the Fox lot. A delightful nostalgia piece, the film is fast, funny and has just the right feel to it. *DANE WILSON*-GDW

Note: Print quality is fair to good, but the best available. The original negative was allowed to decompose in the 1930's.