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Ford made three films in 1936 – *The Prisoner of Shark Island* for 20th Century-Fox, and *Mary of Scotland* and *The Plough and the*



The Informer: the price of betrayal (Victor McLaglen)

Stars for RKO. And within this one year the Ford–Nichols–RKO mystique completely collapsed, and a new theory was born to provide a collective rationale for Ford's rising career. It was the 20th Century-Fox–Darryl F. Zanuck–Nunnally Johnson–Kenneth MacGowan–Lamarr Trotti–Phillip Dunne theory to take us from *The Prisoner of Shark Island* through *Young Mr Lincoln*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *How Green Was My Valley*. Along the way there were all sorts of bumps and detours like *Wee Willie Winkie*, *Four Men and a Prayer*, *Submarine Patrol*, *Drums Along the Mohawk* and *Tobacco Road*, or so it seemed to informed observers at the time and after. It was as if John Ford's directorial soul were the arena for a titanic struggle between the romantic artifices of Dudley Nichols and the realist humanism of the Fox contingent. What was actually happening was that Ford's art was becoming richer and more complex as he played off one aesthetic against another. He was not yet fully in command of his career, but he was discovering his true talents and affinities through productive experience rather than through effete predisposition. He was sifting the tasks from the pleasures, and, in the process, learning to tell all sorts of stories, the taller and fancier the better, with the utmost efficiency and dispatch. Hence, even his failures of this period help us to understand his later masterpieces.

The Prisoner of Shark Island (one of the most satisfying of Ford's Thirties films) begins with a series of ceremonial vignettes culminating in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, America's own Passion

Play. The waxworks portrayal of Lincoln by Frank McGlynn, Snr., is in the traditional mould, but Ford does something special with this memorial figure who embodies both the homely and the heroic, the immediate and the immortal. In death Ford's Lincoln comes to rest in the slowly fading tapestry of legend, not with the sense of a personal destiny as in D. W. Griffith's and Walter Huston's Lincoln, but rather with the gentle implacability of submission to the needs of a nation.

The focus then shifts to the trials and tribulations of Dr Samuel A. Mudd, a true-life victim of the miscarriages of justice which followed the Lincoln assassination. This is the year of *Fury* (inspired by a lynching in California), *Winterset* (inspired by the Sacco–Vanzetti case and its imagined aftermath) and of *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*. It is the year before *The Life of Emile Zola* with the Dreyfus case as its dramatic climax. Of course, audiences had to be assured in each instance that the victim was absolutely innocent of all the charges against him. It was never argued too strenuously that all men must be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and that it was far better for a hundred guilty persons to escape punishment than for one innocent person to be punished unjustly. Quite the contrary. Many movies openly encouraged mob vengeance and vigilante tactics even as other movies sobbed over condemned innocents with whom audiences could lovingly identify. *The Prisoner of Shark Island* depends therefore on a dangerously sentimental plot premise when it suggests that people like us should not be locked up with people like them.

The condescending us–them (as opposed to the ennobling I–thou) dichotomy is nowhere more bothersome than in Mudd's imperious attitude to the cowardly black soldiers temporarily terrorized by the plague on Shark Island until Mudd's threats with a slave-owning Southern accent terrorize them even more. We are just a few steps removed here in 1936 from the general historical assumptions promulgated in 1915 by D. W. Griffith in *Birth of a Nation*. Hence, aside from Father Abraham, the North was a pestilential horde of

scalawags and carpetbaggers visited upon the prostrate but still civilized Southland. The most disruptive act of all was the North's granting of guns and votes to the dear darkies, thus alienating them from their loving masters and mistresses, most notably Margaret Sullavan in the King Vidor–Stark Young *So Red the Rose* and Vivien Leigh in *Gone With the Wind*. Still, the blacks are somewhat

less degraded in *The Prisoner of Shark Island* and *So Red the Rose* than in most other films of the time. If they are not yet irrevocably rebellious, they are at least poised on the brink of manly defiance. That they are not so much separatist as surly betokens the desperately limited options of the black in the cinema of the Thirties, even under the most liberal auspices.

None the less, Ford stages the violent confrontations in *The Prisoner of Shark Island* for everything they are worth. The black mutiny, especially, is photographed with a towering monumentality which somehow evokes both Eisenstein and Dumas, that is, both the phallic thrust of revolutionary history and the subjective vertigo of Gothic romance. Yet the most idiosyncratically Fordian images remain those of submission, redemption and communion – Warner Baxter's Dr Samuel A. Mudd vindicating himself not through escape or revenge, but through service to his sworn enemies; John Carradine's sadistic jailer demanding to be the first to sign Mudd's petition for a pardon; and, most memorably Fordian of all, the return home of Mudd and his black neighbour (Ernest Whitman) to their respective families, each with their separate reunions within the one communal frame of the family of mankind. That the black family of Buckland Montmorency 'Buck' Tilford is conspicuously numerous next to the Mudd clan may be regarded as a racial cliché in the abstract, but not in the particularity of Ford's loving gaze.