IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT and STAGECOACH

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IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT and STAGECOACH

When one is in love with a precocious child, it is difficult to measure its achievements objectively. On the other hand, it is difficult to love at all deeply a child who is loved by everyone. Particularly is this so when the child is the film industry of Hollywood, and the achievements to be measured are examples of the western and comedy film.

Because the standards of such films have been created by Hollywood and exist nowhere apart from Hollywood, the would-be film critic has been faced with a choice: either admit that there is a greater amount of artistic genius in the commercial releases of Hollywood than most other critics would allow (and then begin the long and painstaking task of deciding which, among the innumerable things the industry can do better than anyone else, are those that constitute the core of this genius); or else assume that commercial success and artistic genius are roughly incompatible. Since few have bothered to attempt the former, it is safe to say that most have chosen the latter—-and the result has been a remarkably consistent tradition of worth lessor polemical criticism hastily sketched by uncomfortable critics.

The purpose of this paper is to choose the first alternative above and begin the task of artistic sifting, using Frank Capra's IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT (1934) and John Ford's STAGECOACH (1939) as the classic examples of the comedy and western genres whose genius I shall pursue. (The word 'begin' is important.)[1]

The l930's was a period of transition and surprise, though not always happy, for most Americans. Colonialism in Asia and Africa was collapsing, while the depression was resulting in the rise of totalitarian states in Europe and Roosevelt's 'New Deal' at home. The repeal of prohibition and the kidnapping of the Lindberg child put an end to the tolerance of disrespect for law that had characterised the 1920's, though the sexual codes of the nation continued their shift toward relaxation. 'Business as usual' was no longer the unmitigated good goal, and sharp eyes could discern the shadow of the forthcoming World War.

Hollywood was not immune to this period of change, for the coming of sound and the Hays Office had inverted the 'star' system and thrown previous standards of production on the waste-pile. But if the effect on production standards was disconcerting, the

[1] [Footnote added 05 March 2020]. At the time of the writing of this essay, the author had never written a screenplay or made a movie. As the text confirms, he had only begun the long journey toward comprehending that the success of movies rests upon their screenplays, and that much of the credit given to Frank Capra and John Ford ought rather to have gone to Robert Riskin and Dudley Nichols. Readers will, I hope, correct their reading of it accordingly.

effect on critical standards was even worse, for, though twenty years' hindsight would permit Arthur Knight to say,

> Perhaps because they were so consistently popular on both sides of the water, perhaps because they had no counterparts abroad – whatever the reason – the Westerns and the comedies were permitted to go their merry ways free of foreign entanglements. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that these two indigenous forms during the twenties produced not only some of our best directors – men like Frank Capra, John Ford, George Stevens, William Wyler, and the many disciples of Thomas H. Ince and Mack Sennett – but also all that is most characteristic of American film style. The speed, the tightness, the brilliant timing of action and editing, the steady progression of story line, the clean, bright photography and, on a somewhat more technical level, the knowing use of camera lenses and filters came primarily from the practice and practitioners of these two schools.[2],

the critic of the l930's was, at best, at a confused loss to explain why the new comedies and westerns were successful, much less to attempt to judge whether they were artistic advances or not.

Five Academy Awards

Nowhere is this confusion more evident than in the reaction accorded to Capra's IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT and Ford's STAGECOACH. Although IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT captured five Academy awards in 1934, an unprecedented achievement (for best actor, Clark Gable; best actress, Claudette Colbert; best production, Columbia Pictures; best direction, Frank Capra; and best screen-play, Robert Riskin);[3] and Thomas Mitchell won the Best Supporting Actor award in 1939 for his role as the drunken doctor in STAGECOACH[4] (and, if GONE WITH THE WIND had not been released in the same year, STAGECOACH would probably have garnered several other awards), the comment made by one critic about the Capra comedy could as easily have applied to the Ford western as well.

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[2] Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art: a Panoramic History of the Movies* (New York, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), page 124.

[3] Deems Taylor (with Marcelene Peterson and Bryant Hale), *A Pictorial History of the Movies* (New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), page 271.

[4] Paul Mitchell, *The Academy Awards: a Pictorial History* (New York, New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., 1964), page 94.

> There was no indication that this comedy would take its place among the masterpieces of cinema art.[5]

Critical reactions were seldom articulate, and when they were, they were often contradictory and even self-contradictory. Seymour Stern wrote in 1936,

> Thus we find them (the young intellectuals who write for liberal magazines) acclaiming a picture like It Happened One Night as a 'classic of the American screen'. It Happened One Night was, in effect, a delightfully spontaneous and charming picture, not without its priceless moments of humour. However, it is absolutely certain that it will not be remembered five years hence; as comedy, neither the film nor the mind behind it transcended the framework of strictly popular values. This fact alone, as every developed critic knows, is sufficient to damn any effort that becomes a candidate for the title of a work of art.[6],

only to find himself, in 1940, after it had become apparent that the film was not being forgotten, placing Capra amongst the foremost *intellectual* directors in the history of film.

> Long before the names of Eisenstein in Russia, Fritz Lang in Germany, Alfred Hitchcock in England, or Frank Capra in Hollywood were heard of, Griffith had brought to the screen important historical and philosophical themes, challenging social questions, visionary prophecies of the future.[7]

Lewis Jacobs, in 1939, attempted to define Capra's success.

> Integrity in the selection of his material, seriousness of approach, simple and unpretentious rendition, and emphasis on fresh incident, characterisations, and clever twists – these make his efforts easily appreciated, readily understood, widely enjoyed. His aims and interests coincide with commercial standards; so well, indeed, that his success has obscured his weaknesses and made a virtue of superficiality.[8]

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[5] Ibid., page 53.

[6] Seymour Stern, "The Bankruptcy of Cinema Art", reprinted in *The Movies on Trial: The Views and Opinions of Outstanding Personalities Anent Screen Entertainment Past and Present*, compiled and edited by William J. Perlman (New York, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1936), pages 113-140. [page reference missing].

[7] Seymour Stern, "Griffith: Pioneer of the Film Art", reprinted as pages 153-162 in *Introduction to the Art of the Movies*, selected, arranged and introduced by Lewis Jacobs (New York, New York: The Noonday Press, 1960), page 156.

[8] Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: a Critical History* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), pages 478 and 479.

Then, without bothering to state what these 'weaknesses' and 'superficialities' might be, he proceeded to label IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT as the first of the "daffy" comedies of "satire and self-ridicule" that reflected

> . . . the loss of credibility in former values, the breakdown of the smugness and self-confidence of the jazz era, the growing bewilderment and dissatisfaction in a 'crazy' world that does not make sense . . . .[9]

Frank Daugherty, meanwhile, had written an article in 1938 explaining how Capra's strength lay in his ability to convert otherwise satiric material through his "common touch" and present it warmly and *without* satire.[10]

Paul Rotha, agreeing with Jacobs, named IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT as the first of the "screwball comedies".[11] Of course, while agreeing with the later Seymour Stern [see above] that

> . . . with the exception of LOST HORIZONS (1938) and the farcical ARSENIC AND OLD LACE (1944), each of his [Capra's] films has used an American social, political, or economic problem as its springboard . . . .[12]

Rotha also felt quite content to state that Capra's constant message was essentially antithetical to that of the New Deal, for, when speaking of MR. DEEDS GOES TO TOWN (1938), he would remark that

> The thesis of this sentimental comedy was welcomed by huge sections of the American public. What need for the social reorganisation proposed by the New Deal if prosperity and peace could be recovered by the redemption of the individual? This idea, absolving the middle-classes from realistic thinking about the forces which governed their lives, has proven perennially popular.[13]

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[9] Ibid., page 535.

[10] Frank Daugherty, "He Has the Common Touch", *Christian Science Monitor* magazine, 09 November 1938, page 5.

[11] Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now* (with additional section by Richard Griffith) (New York, New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1952), page 453.

[12] Ibid., page 452.

[13] Ibid., pages 451 and 452.

But Penelope Houston, apparently thinking otherwise, felt equally content in 1963 when she referred to "Frank Capra, once the cinema's spokesman for the New Deal".[14]

Capra, himself, was fond of saying things like

> I like to break the rules. To my mind plot is unimportant . . . I am interested most in characterisations. The people must be real. . . . Fitting the actor to the character is fifty per cent of the battle in creating good pictures. If they are not twin personalities the story itself loses conviction.[15],

which, of course, said more about Capra than about how to judge his films. Some critics, like Otis C. Ferguson, even *apologised* for attempting to define the "secret" of a Capra film, deciding vaguely that Capra changes types into "people with some wit and feeling".[16] Others, like William Troy, finding themselves unable to express why IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT was so pleasing, concluded that ultimately the nature of such a film is "somewhat of a miracle", though the film itself was clearly "an honest documentation of familiar American actualities".[17]

But, if critics couldn't decide why it was successful or if it were an artistic achievement, they at least came to recognise soon enough that its influence was extraordinary. They had little choice.

> Two scenes particularly, the hitchhiking scene and the Walls' of Jericho scene, served as models for film comedy through the years.[18]

> The success of IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT, perhaps Capra's most popular picture, disconcerted Hollywood. For it was the audience that spread the praises of the picture – spread them so enthusiastically that the picture became the industry's biggest sensation, was shown again and again to a captivated public, and still enjoys occasional revivals. Despite all the Hollywood axioms, the film had little of the appeals usually regarded as prime necessities for a hit: "production value", spectacle, gorgeous clothes. It did have other qualities, such as a well-constructed story based on simple human sentiments, fresh locales, witty adult dialogue, intimacy, informality; and above all it was devoid of much of the usual Hollywood affectation. Its success, causing considerable soul-searching in

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[14] Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema* (London: Penguin Books (a Pelican Original), 1963), page 70.

[15] Lewis Jacobs, op. cit., page 474. (Jacobs gives a footnote to the quotation: *Stage*, December 1936.)

[16] *New Republic*, May 9, 1934 (78), page 365.,

[17] *Nation*, April 10, 1935 (140), pages 426 and 427.

[18] See Paul Mitchell, op. cit. (footnote 4), page 53.

> Hollywood, influenced contemporary production as widely if not so deeply as the German and Russian films in the days of the 'silents'.[19]

A similar reaction awaited the release of STAGECOACH in 1939. *Time* magazine pointed out that Ford had evidenced a "notable" contempt for the production code by having a prostitute as heroine (Claire Trevor), a desperado as hero (John Wayne) and a drunken doctor as its most engaging character (Thomas Mitchell).[20] But, as George Bluestone was to remark in 1957, Ford had already made his reputation with THE INFORMER in 1935 that evidenced a similar contempt for convention.

> For certainly THE INFORMER defied most of Hollywood's conventions. It had no happy ending. The hero, though physically powerful, did not repel whole armies of Indians or Arabs with a single carbine. The hero's woman was unmistakably a prostitute, the hero's romantic dreams remained unfulfilled . . . .[21]

Time magazine went on to declare that STAGECOACH was, of course, "no social document". It then, however, proceeded to outline the career of its producer, Walter Wanger, a Dartmouth graduate who had attempted with Mussolini to build a Hollywood in Rome, who had violently broken off the attempt when the axis alliance became apparent, and who had then produced such films as John Howard Lawson's BLOCKADE (1938), becoming known for his "crusade for social consciousness".[22]

John Ford's own remarks were of even less help than Frank Capra's had been in measuring his own films.

> Social significance. Let 'em find it there if they want to. But I don't spend any time looking for it myself. . . . When I make a picture, I try to find people I like in situations I find dramatic.[23]

Some critics, such as Manny Farber, acclaimed the "early, pre-STAGECOACH John Ford" as one of the "true masters of the male action film", seeing the creation of

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[19] Lewis Jacobs, op. cit., pages 476 and 477.

[20] *Time*, March 13, 1939 (33), page 30.

[21] George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley and Los Angles, California: University of California Press, 1961), page 66.

[22] See footnote 19; and also John Howard Lawson, *Film: The Creative Process* (New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pages 124-126.

[23] Frank Daugherty, "John Ford Wants It Real", *Christian Science Monitor* magazine, June 21, 1941, page 5.

STAGECOACH as a regression.[24] Robert Warshow saw Ford's use of the natural setting of Monument Valley as a violation of the basic form of the western.

> But there is also a different way of violating the Western form. This is to yield entirely to its static quality as legend and to the 'cinematic' temptations of its landscape, the horses, the quiet men. John Ford's famous STAGECOACH (1938) had much of this unhappy preoccupation with style . . . [25],

while Seymour Stern applauded Ford for the same effects and listed him in the tradition of Griffith.

> In WAY DOWN EAST, . . . (Griffith) had introduced the use of landscape and natural backgrounds as a vital dramatic and psychological element of the story. The continued application of the same method was beautifully demonstrated last year in John Ford's STAGECOACH (1939).[26]

But, as with IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT, the critics had no choice but to come to recognise that the influence of STAGECOACH was extraordinary if not explicable. Errol Flynn's duel in San Antonio was patterned directly after John Wayne's final duel in STAGECOACH; Monogram's "Rough Riders" series of the l940's used a STAGECOACH freeze-frame as the backing to its main titles; when, in the 195O's, studios began to churn out westerns on a 3-day shooting schedule using available library footage, the footage used most often was that of STAGECOACH itself; and when Howard Hawks directed RED RIVER, THE BIG SKY and RIO BRAVO, they were all hailed as "successors to STAGECOACH" – though they have all been subsequently forgotten while STAGECOACH retains its popularity.[27]

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[24] Manny Farber, "Underground Films" (*Commentary*, November 1957), reprinted as pages 163-174 of *Film: an Anthology*, compiled and edited by Daniel Talbot (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1975 [1959], page 163.

[25] From page 158 of Robert Warshow's "The Westerner", reproduced as pages 148-162 of Daniel Talbot's *Film: an Anthology*, op. cit (footnote 24).

[26] From page 157 of Seymour Stern's "Griffith: Pioneer of the Film Art", reproduced as pages 153-160 of Lewis Jacob's *Introduction to the Art of the Movies*, op. cit. (footnote 7).

[27] Items as noted respectively on pages 244, 259, 302 and 303 and 331 of George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: from Silents to Cinerama* (New York, New York, The Orion Press, 1962).

Other Directors Often Failed

But if the critics had little consistent luck in explaining why IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT and STAGECOACH were successful, and none at all in evaluating their artistic merit, at least a few expressed a confused belief that the total of Ford and Capra's work stood somehow among Hollywood's highest attainments[28] - and several had suggestions to make about the particular techniques each director had used in the two films, though no one attempted to explain why other directors using the same techniques usually failed.

The *Saturday Evening Post* (in an article entitled "Capra Shoots as He Pleases") looked to Capra's early life as a con-man and house-to-house canvasser for the source of his independent common touch.

> He travelled America, hitch-hiking, bus-riding, or driving palaeolithic autos. He put up at American-plan inns.[29]

And, since Capra had earlier taught himself to play several musical instruments, while

> Toscanini once said that if Capra wanted to change jobs, he'd make a first-rate symphony-orchestra conductor … ,[30]

the *Good Housekeeping* shawl of technical "perfectionist" in everything slipped easily over his shoulders. Of course, some thought it significant that

> Capra is happiest when he is filming a picture, lowest when he is cutting and editing it … ,[31]

and most wanted to agree with Lewis Jacobs that

> In all these pictures Capra has shown himself to be a professional craftsman more interested in what he has to say than in the way it is said. Cutting, composition, and rhythm in the more profound sense are rarely seen in his work. His forte is humorous characterisation, the light incident, local colour, and

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[28] See Daugherty, op. cit. (footnote 23).

[29] Alva Johnston, "Capra Shoots as He Pleases", *The Saturday Evening Post* (210:8-9), May 14th, 1938.

[30] Mary Hamman, "Meet Frank Capra Making a Picture", *Good Housekeeping* (112), 11, March, 1941

[31] Ibid., page 74.

> sentiment. . . . Perhaps more than any other director he could be called the O. Henry of the screen,[32]

particularly if the essence of Capra's technique amounted to noticing, along with the *Ladies' Home Journal*, that Capra had purposely made Clark Gable spit on his own lapel while trying to appear as a debonair tough guy.[33]

But some insisted that the creators of IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT were technically more sophisticated than one might at first guess. Lorraine Noble remarked on the use of newspaper headlines as visual transitional devices:

> Newspaper headlines, because they were an integral part of the story and showed the publicity that would grow out of such a situation in real life, were effectively used in dissolves from one episode to another, and served to transport the audience from one locale to another. For instance, when the reporters enter to talk to Westley, there follows a dissolve to the head-lines resulting from this interview and the paper is then shown being read by Ellie. This ability to select for photographing certain highlights that briefly sketch the progress of the story and bridge gaps between events is one of the most important techniques of the screen writer, and one that enables the motion. picture to cover a wide range of material.[34]

And William Troy noticed that the Capra comedy employed a form comparable to the "picaresque" form of novel: one or more characters journeying across some region. Drawing a comparison between the hot-dog stands of Capra and the inns and taverns of Smollett and Sterne, Troy remarked that

> . . . it happens to be a form admirably suited for those periods in history when the dissolution of an existent social structure gives to experience a random, disorganised, centrifugal quality which makes an orderly treatment of it difficult or impossible. As a means of revealing the grotesque contrasts between the old and the new . . . it was exactly appropriate for Cervantes and his many French and English followers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And as a means of bringing out the dizzy contrast presented by life in the United States during the present period—a period in which social and moral ideals are also undergoing a profound change—it should be no less appropriate a device.[35]

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[32] Jacobs, op. cit. (footnote 8), page 476.

[33] Margaret Case Harriman, "Mr. and Mrs. Frank Capra", *Ladies' Home Journal*, (58 2 35), April, 1941, page 155.

[34] *Four-Star Scripts,* edited with introductions by Lorraine Noble (Garden City, New York: Double-day, Doran & Company, Inc., 1936), pages 124 and 125.

[35] See the *Nation*, Nation (138), March 14th, 1934, page 314.

A few even noticed that Capra and Ford (like the present-day Bergman and Kurosawa[36] and most of the neo-realists) had each developed their own stock company of actors, though most gave it little thought. Further, it was well-known that Ford often insisted that the same crew of workers begin and complete a picture.

> Ford himself is most aware of how good or bad his films are. Like Lubitsch and some others, he cuts his pictures whenever he is allowed. When he inserts in a film something he does not believe is right, it is because he must compromise. Ford knows so well the medium in which he is working that he rarely leaves the composition, camera angle, lighting continuity and editing to highly skilled technicians as almost all other directors do. Whenever possible he participates in all phases of production and believes that from first to last the picture must be seen through by the same group of workers.[37]

But many seemed willing to suggest that Ford's precision in editing was the result of an intuitive inexplicable grasp of the extent to which the bare visual structure of a film could carry its own weight.

> Not only his sound but even his wide-screen films reveal his long experience, combining the visual continuity of silent editing techniques with a perfect instinct for just how much each shot should tell. He is so certain of his effects that his editors claim he cuts his films within the camera, providing them with little more than they actually need to piece the scene together. His takes, generally shorter than most directors', move with incredible precision from point to point, always anticipating the audience's natural curiosity. . . . Never one to cut for shock effect or to create an artificial sense of surprise or excitement, Ford's films demonstrate functional editing at its best – precise, unobtrusive, and sure.[38]

Some recognised that Ford had taken many of the techniques in STAGECOACH directly from the past, however. RIDERS OF THE DAWN (1938) had featured . . .

> . . . one of the most flawlessly constructed, staged, and photographed concluding reels ever put on film; a chase across salt flats that compares more than favourably with Ford's chase in STAGECOACH.[39]

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[36] Houston, op. cit. (footnote 14), page 145.

[37] Jacobs, op. cit. (footnote 8), page 485.

[38] Knight, op. cit. (footnote 2), page 190.

[39] Fenin and Everson, op. cit. (footnote 27), page 217.

When Ford called on Yakima Canutt to plan and execute the stunts in the STAGECOACH chase, Canutt was already the top stunt-man in the business. And Ford, renowned already for his "flair for accurate costuming", was well-aware when planning STAGECOACH of the effect that John Wayne's unconventional outfit would have.[40]

> One of the very few Westerns to really defy the conventions of the Western dress, Hollywood style, was Ford's STAGECOACH. John Wayne wore, instead of a belt, suspenders, and juvenile audiences in particular found this most distressing: they though the looked half-dressed and not very glamorous. The costume has not been worn since.[41]

STAGECOACH was also John Ford's first sound western. In THE INFORMER (1935),Ford had experimented extensively with the use of sound to emphasise the emotional tone of particular scenes. Themes were used like Wagnerian leitmotifs, aural substitutes were used as substitutes for Gypo's interior monologues, and sounds were used for cinematic transitions.

> The themes of the blind man and the minstrel boy, the money, the informer, and 'The Wearing of the Green' are woven together in a loose kind of medley which sounds at appropriate tempos . . . after the betrayal, Gypo sits in a pub trying to formulate a plan. He seems to hear Frankie's mocking voice, 'Ah, Gypo, I'm your brain. You're lost. . . . You're lost . . . .'[42]

> After Gypo informs on his friend, there is suddenly heard the ticking of a clock: we have a prescience of relentless evil. The ticking continues into the next shots: Frankie at home with his mother and sister; there another clock continues the sound and thus wields the transition structurally.[43]

And Ford made extensive, though selective and less blatantly-experimental, use of these new aural techniques in STAGECOACH. The sound of the bugle is heard by Mrs. Mallory long seconds before either the rest of the STAGECOACH passengers or the audience are made aware of the cavalry's saving presence.[44] And, from the screen-play's description of the beautiful sound montage of the birth scene,

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[40] Ibid., pages 189 and 293.

[41] Ibid., pages 188 and 189.

[42] Bluestone, op. cit. (footnote 21), page 86.

[43] Jacobs, op. cit. (footnote 8), page 482

[44] *Great Film Plays*, edited by John Gassner and Dudley Nichols (New York, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1959), page 327.

> The howl of a coyote is heard again. Then the sound merges into a high thin wail much louder than the coyote's and they all hunch up listening.
>
> Buck: Them coyotes gimme the creeps. They sound jest like. . . (again the high wail, louder) . . . jest like a baby.
>
> This time the wail is unmistakably a new-born baby's squall of greeting to life and they all get up as if on strings, turning to watch the passage door . . . [45],

it is apparent how developed this technique had become in Ford's hands.

But natural and artificial noises are only one-half of the sound spectrum: the remainder is dialogue – and dialogue must usually be scripted. It was soon noticed by several critics that the writer of IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT, Robert Riskin, had also collaborated with Frank Capra in LADY FOR A DAY (1933), MR. DEEDS GOES TO TOWN (1936), YOU CAN'! TAKE IT WITH YOU (1938), and MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (1939). Similarly, Dudley Nichols, who scripted STAGECOACH, had also collaborated with John Ford on THE LOST PATROL (1934),THE INFORMER (1935), THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS (1936), and THE LONG VOYAGE HOME (l940).[46] The coming of sound, had thus given rise to an entirely new type of entity on the Hollywood scene: the writer-director team. And the resulting change in film quality was obvious.

> John Ford can be said to have found himself in his association with Dudley Nichols, the writer. In complementing each other to the best advantage, they are like Frank Capra and Robert Riskin, John Ford alone made merely commercial box-office successes; the John Ford-Dudley Nichols combination, after a few desultory efforts, made above-the-average films.[47]

But what new factor had the writer-director team introduced to cause this change? What could a writer-director team contribute to a production that a writer and director working separately could not? No one knew for certain, though many tried to guess. Some held that it was a means of providing a new quality of realism in dialogue.

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[45] Ibid., page 314.

[46] Knight, op. cit. (footnote 2), page 182.

[47] Jacobs, op. cit. (footnote 8), page 479.

> Screen writers had to invent dialogue that was at once rich and colourful pungent and amusing, but also stripped of inessentials. They had to learn not only what to say, but also how much could be left unsaid – how much could be left to the camera and the actor and the director to put on the screen through action and gesture or by implication.[48]

The problem had always been to create dialogue that did not interfere with, but contributed to, the photographic reality on the screen. Capra and Ruskin seemed able to solve this dilemma effortlessly.

> Borderline cases are the comedies by Frank Capra and Preston Sturges which just manage to counter-balance their sophisticated dialogue by visuals of independent interest—fresh slapstick incidents that complement, and compensate for, the witty repartee.[49]

> . . . Capra demonstrated his confidence in the ability of his colleague to write dialogue that held its own upon the screen by filming long passages without any change in camera position whatsoever. His special skill lay in recreating the speed and humour of silent comedy in the sound medium, feeling out the subtle relationship between dialogue and camera, sensing when cutting or camera movement was required and when words alone could carry the momentum of the scene. If the talk was good, he reasoned why try to hide it.[50]

Of course, Capra remained concerned to see useless dialogue eliminated from pictures;[51] but he and Riskin had demonstrated that dialogue need not be useless.

> When he was making LADY FOR A DAY he was told on all sides that it was too talky; the theory of that period was that action was the thing and that spoken lines should be introduced sparingly. Capra said that his characters could talk their heads off if their lines were good, and the public was delighted with the incessant chatter . . . .[52]

> Only when the dialogue was important [within IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT], when it bore significantly on the development of the story, did he move in for protracted close-ups. But these close-ups were completely functional: they emphasised the words. Capra sensed when he could count on Riskin's lines to

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[48] Knight, op. cit. (footnote 2), page 181.

[49] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press (A Galaxy Book), 1965), page 104.

[50] Knight, op. cit. (footnote 2), pages 182 and 183.

[51] Daugherty, op. cit. (footnote 9), page 5.

[52] Johnston, op. cit. (footnote 29), page 72.

> carry a scene without additional visual pyro-technics, when they could be shot with a static camera or when the full effectiveness of the scene required the extra mobility of the moving camera and staccato editing of silent days.[53]

Some critics noticed, as well, that Capra and Ford had developed a new way of handling speaking actors.

> Capra was also among the first to perceive that the use of dialogue on the screen involved not only the preparation of a taut, vivid, idiomatic prose, but also a more specialised hand-ling of the actors delivering the dialogue. . . . In the silent days the director could (and often did) build a star's performance out of bits and pieces—a close-up of the actor, a reaction shot, an insert of an object or an image that underscored the emotional content of the scene. With sound, much of this 'synthetic' kind of acting was automatically eliminated. Not only did the actors now have to speak their lines but . . . the sound track itself produced a far greater awareness of their essential personality than the silent camera ever had . . . Directors like Capra,' Ford, George Cukor and William Wyler who gained the reputation of being 'good with actors' were good because they knew how to fit their stars to their roles, and how to utilise their personalities to sustain the momentum of a scene.[54]

But it took Dudley Nichols, Ford's collaborator, to make explicit why the ability to create terse dialogue and elicit responsive performances from actors was not the key to the success of the writer-director team. For the writer-director team was the embodiment of an entirely new expression of the function of the motion-picture medium itself:

> Unthinking people speak of the motion picture as a medium of 'action'; the truth is that the stage is the medium of action while the screen is the medium of reaction. It is through identification with the person acted upon on the screen, and not with the person acting, that the film builds up its oscillating power with an audience. This is understood instinctively by the expert film-makers, but to my knowledge it has never been formulated.[55]

Dialogue was no longer to be a substitute for action, but the means of clarifying reaction. This meant, of course, that the new dialogue must be terse and free from any literary taint that would destroy its realism. But it meant much more than this: it meant that the very structure of the stories themselves, every visual sequence and every audio montage, had to be constructed as a unit free from discordant elements, for otherwise

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[53] Knight, op. cit. (footnote 2), page 183.

[54] Ibid., pages 183 and 184.

[55] See page xi of Nichols' essay "The Writer and the Film", his introduction to Gassner and Nichols, op. cit (footnote 44).

the reactions demanded of the audience would be discordant. A new way of using reality itself as symbol had to be utilised, for otherwise the symbols would destroy the reality of the situation. As Nichols put it,

> Symbolism is only good when the audience is not aware of it.[56]

Only a writer and director who had worked together from the beginning of a screen-play's conception could produce a script which would result in a film possessing this degree of artistic unity. Lewis Jacobs, speaking of THE LAST PATROL, saw therein

> . . . the qualities that were to distinguish Ford's later work: a single strong situation, unity of time, place, mood, vivid characterisation, colourful locale, suspense. Ford and Nichols strove to achieve that 'wholeness of mood and effort' which has been their professed aim ever since.[57]

And what would be the result of such "wholeness of mood and effort"? Hopefully, a film that would both tell a story, comment upon society, incorporate a philosophical theme, employ symbolism, etc., without losing the ability to remain essentially a film about real people in a real situation.

They had Perfected a Technique

The critics had been in general agreement that the characters in IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT and STAGECOACH conveyed a remarkable degree of genuine humanness. Most attribute this quality to the directorial skills of Capra and Ford, or to the new dialogue. But, in any case, most agreed that Capra's and Ford's characters smacked of reality much more than most other directors' characters.

What most critics could not understand, however, was that the unique efforts of Riskin-Capra and Nichols-Ford had, indeed, produced a comedy and a western which were more than stories about real people. For, by their new conception of the function of the writer and director, they had succeeded in perfecting a technique whereby even the comedy and the western could serve as vehicles of comment and criticism upon the society of the people in the audience – without destroying the reality of the film through satire of the age-worn clichés of the west. Both Riskin-Capra and Nichols-Ford gloried in clichés, for, in their hands, clichés lost their unreality, and the critics who couldn't

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[56] *National Board of Review*, March, 1936, as quoted in Jacobs, op. cit. (footnote 8), page 482.

[57] Jacobs, op. cit. (footnote 8), pages 479 and 480.

understand how the 'Capra-corn' or Ford's traditional formula could possibly pay dividends were left without the dividends.[58]

IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT was a comedy, and hence one would expect its mode of comment to be less symbolic and indirect than that of the more serious STAGECOACH. But what was the nature of Capra and Riskin's comment? Perhaps because she was more at home among clichés than others, the writer for the *Ladies' Home Journal* came closest to grabbing it:

> The moral . . . is either that the common man is the true gentleman, or else that great wealth can bring great unhappiness, or else that true happiness comes from giving happiness to others.. . . Hatred of the rich and pompous . . . probably comes less from a desire to crusade in defence of the poor than from the fact that great wealth often seems to him (Capra) ludicrous. . . .The average man is a great guy. He doesn't want much, Capra says, 'Just peace, and freedom, and a break. And he's fundamentally good. If he wasn't, we couldn't hire enough cops to keep him in order'.[59]

Cops! Capra had risen under Mack Sennett's tutelage and through the Langdon comedies of the 1920's.[60] And even now, less than one year after the Lindberg kidnapping case and the repeal of prohibition, Capra couldn't resist showing how ludicrous the efforts of a flock of detectives to locate one lost young lady could be. While in the pay of her rich father, two detectives see Ellie, remark to Peter how much she looks like the girl 'Ellie Andrews' they're seeking, and are then conned by Peter and Ellie into walking away, convinced otherwise.[61] Frustrated at the general incompetence of well-paid detectives. Ellie's father remarks:

Andrews: (muttering)	Amateurs!
Secretary:	They're the finest detectives in the country, sir.[62]

Riskin and Capra had a knowing touch, however: only the paid detectives were shown as incompetent! Actual policemen, appearing only once in the entire film, are presented as

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[58] It is no accident, I suggest, that most of the note-worthy serious films of the last two decade shave been either directed and written by the same person (e.g. Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini, Kurosawa), or created by a writer-director team (e.g. Zavattini-DeSica).

[59] Harriman, op. cit. (footnote 33), pages 35 and 155.

[60] Knight, op. cit. (footnote 2), pages 36-38, 128 and 129.

[61] Gassner and Nichols, op. cit. (footnote 44), page 27.

[62] Ibid., page 22.

dutiful public servants warning the bus-drivers of a washed-out bridge ahead.[63] And Capra knew how to use the Lindberg case to his advantage, also. When Shapeley tries to talk Peter into turning Ellie in and splitting the reward, Peter convinces Shapeley that he is actually a kidnapper working for the "killer" – and that Shapeley's kids are liable to get hurt if he doesn't remain silent.

> Peter: Ever hear of Bugs Dooley? . . . Nice guy. Just like you. But he made a big mistake, one day. Got kind of talkative. Know what happened'? His kid was found in the bottom of the river. A rock tied around its neck. Poor Bugs! He couldn't take it. Blew his brains out.[64]

Shapeley is so frightened that he runs away – and remains silent.

Capra capitalised on the four dominant social problems of the day: law-enforcement, unemployment, money (and, hence, the ability to procure food), and the changing moral standards. Ellie, a rich girl accustomed to rich ways, suddenly finds herself in a situation where she must ride buses, stay in auto-camps, and go hungry. Without her money, she finds herself without influence, has her bag stolen by a hoodlum, loses her bus ticket, has her dignity shot to pieces before an auto-camp latrine, and, in general, finds herself relatively worthless.[65] As Peter remarks:

> Peter: Just goes to show you. Twenty millions and you don't know how to dunk [a doughnut].[66]

But on the way she meets, and falls in love with, Peter – and learns slowly that her money was one of the less important things in life, for she's a human being and a female with or without it. The hitch-hiking scene within which she learns that, because she's a female, she can pick up a ride faster than Peter, is one of the most delightful ever filmed. Capra embodied in Ellie many of the characteristics and confusions of the newly emancipated female, and played with all of them: she had gotten married to King Westley too quickly (without knowledge or love or even sex), but is initially shocked at Peter's money-saving device of registering them as 'Mr. and Mrs.' at the auto-camps; she smokes, but loses her toothbrush;[67] and, until meeting Peter, her only alternative when cornered had been to run away.

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[63] Ibid., page 17.

[64] Gassner and Nichols, op. cit. (footnote 44), page 32.

[65] Ibid., pages 1, 13, 16 and 23.

[66] Ibid., page 25.

[67] Ibid., pages 41 and 42.

Ellie: You think this whole business is silly, don't you? I mean running away. . . . Yes, you do. You think I'm a fool and a spoiled brat. Perhaps I am, although I don't see how I can be. People who are spoiled are accustomed to having their own way. I never have. On the contrary, I've always been told what to do and how to do it and where and with whom. Would you believe it? This is the first time I've ever been alone with a man . . . It's a wonder I'm not panic stricken.

Peter: Um. You're doing all right.[68]

But Capra, from the beginning, keeps her a real and potentially very lovable human being.

Capt.: What a hell cat. No controlling these modern girls. They're terrible!

Andrews: Terrible! Nothing terrible about her. She's great! Marvellous youngster. Got a mind of her own. Knows just what she wants. She's not going to get it though. She won't get far. Has no money.[69]

But Ellie neither knew what she wanted, nor could money have gotten it for her if she had known, and it took Peter to convince her of both. Capra had begun the film with Ellie in a pseudo-Ghandian hunger strike—a petulant daughter refusing to eat the generously available food, for childish principles. [70] But later, when a mother collapses on the bus from lack of food, Capra's comment on money and its worth begins to be more clearly expressed. As Peter is about to give the woman's little boy a single small bill from his and Ellie's dwindling resources, Ellie suddenly takes a much bigger bill and hands it to the boy.

[68] Ibid, 24 and 25.

[69] Ibid, page 6.

[70] Ibid, pages 2-6.

Boy:	I shouldn't oughta take this. Ma'll be angry.
Ellie:	(confidentially). Just don't tell her anything about it. You don't want her to get sick again, do you?
Boy:	(a sob in his voice). No-o. But I shouldn't oughta take the money. (To Peter). You might need it.
Peter:	Me? Forget it, son. I got millions.[71]

Of course, Peter and Ellie are now almost broke – but for the first time he's proud of her, and their shared happiness of the moment is a prelude to her discovery that life can always be faced when someone's proud of you, even though you're both almost broke. Throughout the film, Peter behaves in a fashion of which Ellie could be proud: he's almost the perfect gentleman. When she's sleeping, whether in a bus or beside a haystack, Peter manages to cover her with his topcoat; when she loses her ticket, Peter is there to pick it up; when she awakes in the morning at the auto-camp, he has already arisen, bought her a new tooth-brush, pressed her clothes, and prepared breakfast; he saves her from the rude attentions of Shapeley, and saves their luggage from Danker, the road thief; and, above all, he refuses to yield to sexual temptation, though, with only a hung-blanket separating their two beds on most occasions(nick-named the "Walls of Jericho"), it becomes an almost super-human feat.[72]

But, above all, Peter refuses to compromise himself and become overly concerned with money. When he loses his job on the newspaper, his confidence remains unshaken. Unemployed and nearly broke, "with head held high, he struts majestically out of sight (toward the bus station), followed by his admirers" shouting "Make way for the King. Long live the King. Make way . . . ".[73] They're all drunk, of course, but it is no accident that they call him "King", for Capra meant to contrast Peter with King Westley, the money-loving gigolo pilot whom Ellie had married. Much later, when Ellie is trying (momentarily) to forget Peter, she tells King Westley:

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[71] Ibid., page 30.

[72] Ibid., pages 12, 13, 16, 22, 39 and 43.

[73] Ibid., page 8.

Ellie: It's up to you now. I want our life to be full of excitement, King. We'll never let up, will we? Never a dull moment. We'll get on a merry-go-round and never get off. Promise you'll never let me get off? It's the only way to live, isn't it? No time to think. We don't want to stop to think, do we? Just want to keep going.[74]

But, of course, all along Ellie had really wanted to go with Peter to his dream island.

Peter: I saw an island in the Pacific once. Never been able to forget it. That's where I'd like to take her [the 'right sort of girl'] . . . that'd jump in the surf with me on moonlight nights – and love it as much as I did. You know, those nights when you and the moon and the water all become one – when something comes over you – and you feel that you're part of something big and marvelous. (Sighing) Those are the only places to live. Where the stars are so close over your head you could reach right up and stir them around.[75]

For Peter, though a dreamer of sorts, had learned (and Ellie had to learn) that money wasn't all that important. Earlier, when she had tried to buy Peter's assistance, he had retorted:

Peter: . . . You know, I had you pegged right from the start; you're a spoiled brat of a rich father. The only way you can get anything is to buy it. Now you're in a jam and all you can think of is your money. It never fails, does it? Ever hear of the word 'Humility'? No, you wouldn't. I guess it never occurred to you to just say, 'Please mister, I'm in trouble. Will you help me?' No; that'd bring you down o your high horse for a minute. Let me tell you something; maybe it'll take a load off your mind. You don't have to worry about me. I'm not interested in your

[74] Ibid., page 53.

[75] Ibid., page 42.

> money or your problems; you, King Westley, your father, you're all a lot of hooey to me.[76]

And he proves it. Instead of accepting the $10,000 reward when it is offered to him, he refuses and instead asks for "$39.60" to cover the costs of the trip!81 And when a confused Andrews remarks

> Andrew: The average man would go after the reward. All you seem to —
>
> Peter: Listen, did anybody ever make a sucker out of you? This is a matter of principle. Something you probably wouldn't understand.[77]

Capra's Peter has little money, no job and no reputation, but he has principle. Because of this, he ultimately wins Ellie, and they spend their first ideal honey-moon night in a modest auto-camp in Glen Falls, Michigan – where , with a blast from a toy trumpet, a cheap blanket falls and the Walls of Jericho come tumbling down at last.[78]

John Ford's STAGECOACH, if anything, had an even simpler basic plot.

> A group of widely assorted characters . . . are placed in a dangerous situation— Geronimo is about to attack. This situation forces their true characters to rise to the surface. In keeping with tradition, too, those who display the most nobility are the social outcasts (a gambler, an outlaw, and a prostitute),while the most 'respectable' member of the party (a banker played by Berton Churchill) turns out to be the least worthy, a man of neither courage nor principles.[79]

But simple plots can be extremely deceiving, particularly in the hands of a writer as concerned with the theory of unobtrusive symbolism as Dudley Nichols. Every rider on the STAGECOACH undergoes a transformation of character somewhere on the journey – except Gatewood the banker: Dallas, a whore who has been driven out of town by the ladies of the Law and Order League, becomes a new woman with a future through Ringo's love; Ringo, by loving Dallas, finds the possibilities of his own life transformed; Curly Wilcox, a hard but trustworthy U.S. marshal, decides at the conclusion of the journey to go contrary to the law and help Ringo and Dallas to start over the border; Mrs. Lucy Mallory, an easterner in a strange country, gives birth to a baby in mid-

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[76] Ibid., page 14.

[77] Ibid., page 55.

[78] Ibid., page 58.

[79] Fenin and Everson, op. cit. (footnote 27), page 238.

journey, and thereby comes to learn to respect Dallas regardless of her past; Hatfield, a gambler, dies "better than he lived", having become a gentleman again;[80] Doc Boone, a drunk, sobers up so he can deliver Lucy's baby – and succeeds; and Mr. Peacock, a whiskey salesman who was once a minister, emerges from the journey with a wound in the arm and a new understanding of himself. Only the banker, Gatewood, undergoes no basic transformation, remaining the unrecognised and unrepentant thief from first to last, though the events of the journey do serve to deepen his distrust of everyone else before it's over.

What sort of crucible is this STAGECOACH? Ford could, of course, make his symbols obvious whenever they would not damage the reality of the situation. And, to an audience of the New Deal era, Gatewood, a crooked banker who s poke for the business interests of the urban East, was hardly a non-obvious symbol.

Gatewood:	Ever since I opened this bank I've been trying to tell these people to deposit their pay rolls here six months in advance. It's good, sound business.
Agent:	(pleasantly). It's good business for you, Mr. Gatewood.
Gatewood:	Here's your receipt. Fifty thousand dollars. (smiling affably). And remember this – what's good business for the banks is good for the country. Money makes the world go round, my friend. A businessman can't make money unless there's plenty of it in circulation. We're cut off from the world in this slow-poke town. The place to make money is in the East—in the big cities.[81]

Everyone had heard the cries of big business against the New Deal – the government was no longer giving business the aid that it had received under Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, and thought it deserved. Ford, by having the crooked banker react to the soldiers' departure, and later by having Doc Boone react to him, covered business and the repeal of prohibition in one cinematic swoop.

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[80] Phrase quoted from Gassner and Nichols, op. cit. (footnote 44), page 327.

[81] Ibid., page 295.

Gatewood: I call this desertion of duty, young man. I'll take it up with your superior officers! I'll take it up with Washington if necessary.

[and a bit later]

I don't know what this government's coming to! Instead of protecting business men, it's poking its nose into business. Why, they're talking now about having bank examiners . . . as if we don't know how to run our own banks. I actually had a letter, doctor, from some popinjay official saying they were going to inspect my books!

Doc Boone: (lowering the [whiskey] bottle from his mouth with delight). Aaaahh! . . .

Gatewood: I have a programme, gentlemen, that should be blazoned on every newspaper in the country. America for Americans! Don't let the government meddle with business! Reduce taxes! Our national debt is shocking-over a billion dollars! What the country needs is a businessman for President!

Doc Boone: (amiably holding up the bottle). What the country needs is more of this.[82]

The effects of the depression had been bitter, and Ford knew his audiences would understand the following lines.

Dallas: My people were killed by the Indians. I was just a kid. There was a massacre in the Superstition Mountains.

Ringo: That's tough on a girl. It's a hard country.

Dallas: You have to live, no matter what happens.

Ringo: Yeah, that's it.[83]

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[82] Ibid., page 305, then pages 309 and 310.

[83] Ibid., pages 316 and 317.

But, like Capra, Ford was concerned that the less important things of life be distinguished from the essential, and money and social status were less important than human character. When Hatfield offers Lucy a drink from his silver cup, but refuses to offer it to Dallas, Ringo passes Dallas his canteen.

> Ringo: Sorry I haven't got a silver cup.
>
> Dallas: (quickly). I like it better this way. (She puts the canteen to her lips.)[84]

And then, when he offers to marry her, not knowing she's been a whore, Dallas shouts in frustration:

> Dallas: You don't know me! You don't know who I am!
>
> Ringo: I know all I want to know. You're the kind of girl a man wants to marry.[85]91

The Journey of Life

But the comment of Ford in STAGECOACH cannot be understood by an examination of the obvious symbolism alone, for Ford meant his story to convey a much more universal statement than is obvious. Critics have called Ringo's (John Wayne's) duel at the end "anti-climactic";[86] and they have hinted that Ford would have been less sentimental and more accurate had he followed de Maupassant (in *Boule de Suif*) rather than Ernest Haycox (in *Stage to Lordsburg*) and shown the passengers turning on Dallas (Claire Trevor) and despising her again once the crisis and her own usefulness are past.[87] But such criticisms miss the beautiful if non-obvious point: there were reasons why Ringo had to fight in Lordsburg and Dallas had to be accepted, reasons fundamental to the nature of the story itself – for Ford meant STAGECOACH to represent nothing less, in microcosm, than the journey of life itself.

When the story opens, the telegraph lines have just been cut, severing all communications with the destination of the STAGECOACH. But what is this destination? Lordsburg! (i.e. the city of the Lord). From that point on, the story centres on the trials of a STAGECOACH of passengers trying to get to Lordsburg. Often they are on the verge

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[84] Ibid., page 311.

[85] Ibid., page 317.

[86] Fenin and Everson, op. cit. (footnote 27), page 238.

[87] Ibid., pages 238 and 239.

of turning back, but somehow they always vote to go on. With the lines down, their journey is lonely and dangerous, and each passenger must learn to react to the journey and Lordsburg in his own fashion.

To Gatewood, Lordsburg is the way of escape. When he boards the stage-coach, he remarks that he has just received a telegram from Lordsburg; but of course, the lines are down and he is lying. No one has received any word from Lordsburg. Later, when the STAGECOACH does arrive in Lordsburg, a telegram has been received from their starting point telling of Gatewood's thievery; the lines have been fixed and he is trapped. But notice: the essential communication came *to* Lordsburg, not *from* it.

To Ringo, Lordsburg is the place where he must go to avenge the death of his father and brother. Along the way he learns to love Dallas, and Dallas almost talks him into running away from the STAGECOACH and its destination and heading for the border, where she will meet him after she has completed the journey to Lordsburg

Dallas:	Why don't you escape, kid? Why don't you escape?
Ringo:	(chucking another stone). I aim to, Miss Dallas – in Lordsburg.
Dallas:	Why Lordsburg? Why don't you get over the border? . . .
Ringo:	My father and brother was shot down by the Plummers. I guess you don't know how it feels to lose your own folks that way. (He chucks a stone.)[88]

But the sight of Indian smoke causes him to stop and face the reality of the journey, not running away. When he arrives in Lordsburg, the Plummers are waiting and he fights the duel. That's why he came , and that's why he wins. To Dallas, Lordsburg is just another town until she learns to love Ringo.

Then it becomes a place to be feared, for Ringo is determined to go there, and when he does, he will find out about her past. She does all in her persuasive power to turn him away, but he remains constant to his purpose; and eventually she finds out that her fears were groundless, for he remains constant to his love for her also.

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[88] Gassner and Nichols, op. cit. (footnote 44), page 316.

To Mrs. Mallory, Lordsburg is the city where she will be united with her husband. At first she expects to meet him at Dry Fork, then at Apache Wells, but she has to learn, like the others, that happiness is not to be found at anyplace other than Lordsburg- at the journey's end.

But the journey of the STAGECOACH is more than a chronicle of living. It is the story of learning how to live, the story of salvation, for each passenger must undergo a transformation for the STAGECOACH to arrive safely in Lordsburg. Mrs. Mallory is advised not to travel on the same STAGECOACH with Dallas, but it's the only way to get to her husband, so she agrees to ride, though not associate, with the girl. However, when she is having her baby, Dallas assists at the birth – and both Lucy and Hatfield come to understand that their pride has been misplaced. Doc Boone and Hatfield begin by hating each other, having fought on opposite sides of the Civil War, but the birth of the child and the threat of death draw them together. Dallas loses her hardness and becomes a woman (in Ringo's eyes) while assisting at the birth of the baby. Doc Boone is forced, by the birth, to sober-up and become a doctor again. Only Gatewood, who refuses to give up his burden (i.e. the satchel of money) and, hence, his guilt, emerges without the transformation – and without salvation.

When the cavalry appears from Lordsburg, the transformations have already taken place. Ford has the cavalry come, not by accident, but because his characters have already chosen to cleanse themselves, and it is now up to God to 'help those who help themselves'. The passengers, with the exception of Gatewood, have overcome their petty ways of looking at things; the past no longer binds them. As Ringo later remarks to Dallas (knowing now that she has been a whore), when he is about to fight the duel,

> Ringo: (holding out his wrists, his voice calm). See them scars? Handcuffs. . . . Scars wear off, Dallas. (He puts his hands on her shaking shoulders.) I ain't gonna give you a chance to forget me. You wait here.[89]

The comment of STAGECOACH was ultimately and beautifully the application of the Christian myth to a story about real people. And it is, therefore, not strange at all that the central event in the transformation (i.e. salvation) of the passengers was not the fight with the Apaches on the salt flats – but rather the birth of a baby in a side-room of a dirty way-station in the middle of the journey.

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[89] Ibid., page 332.

Penelope Houston has suggested that directors such as

> . . . John Ford, with . . . his abiding feeling for an old, emotive Americanism, are directors who have grown up with the myths. They can kick the movies around. They are not scared of repetition, or self-parody, or the obvious. . . . Confidently, easily, unerringly, it is put before us; and there is a relaxed assurance about the film-making of Hollywood's old guard that one doesn't quite find anywhere else in the world. Directors like this, you feel, put the machinery together: they don't have to keep taking it to pieces to check on whether it still works. For they . . . and others among the older generation . . . (like) Frank Capra . . . have supremely the movie-making faculty.[90]

"Faculty"? For some reason, as I conclude this paper, I can't decide whether to laugh or cry.

[90] Houston, op. cit. (footnote 14), page 70.