

NOW SHOWING  
*Stagecoach*

Studio	<i>United Artists</i>
Producer/distributor	<i>Walter Wanger</i>
Director	<i>John Ford</i>
Screenplay	<i>Dudley Nichols</i>
Year	<i>1939</i>
Filmed in	<i>Black and White</i>
*Academy Awards	<i>*Best Supporting Actor &amp; Music</i>
	<i>Five other nominations</i>
Cast	Role
<a href="#">Claire Trevor</a>	<i>Dallas</i>
<a href="#">John Wayne</a>	<i>Henry "The Ringo Kid"</i>
* <a href="#">Thomas Mitchell</a>	<i>"Doc" Boone</i>
<a href="#">Andy Devine</a>	<i>"Buck"</i>
<a href="#">John Carradine</a>	<i>Hatfield</i>
<a href="#">George Bancroft</a>	<i>Marshall "Curly" Wilcox</i>
Louise Platt	<i>Lucy Mallory</i>
Donald Meek	<i>Samuel Peacock</i>
Berton Churchill	<i>Henry Gatewood</i>
Tim Holt	<i>Lt. Blanchard</i>
Tom Tyler	<i>Luke Plummer</i>
Chris-Pin Martin	<i>Innkeeper</i>
Elvira Rios	<i>Yakima</i>
Brenda Fowler	<i>Mrs. Gatewood</i>
Chief Whitehorse (NA)	<i>Geronimo</i>
Yakima Canutt (NA)	<i>Cavalry Scout (stuntman)</i>

Roger Ebert Critique

"Stagecoach" is a film in which two great careers were renewed. Although he had appeared before in many films, as an extra, a stuntman and then an actor in B films, this was **John Wayne's** first starring role in a film by **John Ford**. For **Ford**, it was a return after some years to a genre about which his ideas had grown--the genre in which he would make many of his greatest films. With **Ford's** clout as a director and **Wayne's** clout as a star, they would make iconic films and establish themselves as one of the legendary partnerships in cinema.

They came together at a propitious moment in **Ford's** career. He was 45. He had directed his first silent films (ten of them!) in 1917. He had tasted great success, and won an Academy Award for directing "*The Informer*" in 1936. But now came his years of triumph. No director of the sound era made more great films more quickly than **Ford**. **Ford** had his eye on **John Wayne** from the days when he was called **Marion Morrison**, nicknamed **Duke**, and was a football player from USC, working summers at 20th Century-Fox. In the decade before "Stagecoach" **Wayne** worked in some 40 Westerns, from an extra to a lead, without distinguishing himself. **Ford** thought he had the makings of a star, and decided **Wayne** was right for the key role of the Ringo Kid in "*Stagecoach*." The studio was adamantly opposed to the casting; it demanded a name actor.

Seen today, "*Stagecoach*" may not seem very original. That's because it influenced countless later movies in which a mixed bag of characters are thrown together by chance and forced to survive an ordeal. The genre is sometimes called the **Ark Movie**. The film at times plays like an anthology of *timeless clichés*. You will see a woman going into labor as a doctor orders, "Boil water! Hot water! And lots of it!" You will meet a prostitute with a heart of gold, and an evil banker, and a shifty gambler, and a pure-hearted heroine, and murderous Apaches, and a sultry Indian wife, and a meek little traveling man, and a chase scene with a stagecoach driver going hell-

bent for leather. You will see saloons, corrals, vast landscape, camp fires, and the U. S. Cavalry--which sounds the charge before riding to the rescue.

Despite the familiarity of these conventions, **Ford** tells a *story*, during which we learn to know the characters and become invested in them. He doesn't give all the key scenes to the same big star.

**Trevor** was a star, but **Ford** gave nearly equal weight to the other passengers in the stagecoach, all played by actors who would have been familiar to movie audiences: Squeaky-voiced **Andy Devine** as the driver, **John Carradine** as the elegant gambler, **Thomas Mitchell** as the alcoholic Doc Boone, **Louise Platt** as the pregnant soldier's wife, and **Donald Meek** as the effeminate Mr. Peacock, a traveling salesman who improbably wears a checkered deerstalker hat in the Old West. As they line up facing each other, the Ringo Kid sits on the floor between them, but **Ford** somehow never frames him to seem lower.

Confined for a good deal of the film inside the stagecoach, these gifted actors create a *fascinating community* as they gradually reveal their *hidden reasons* for traveling in great discomfort though hazardous Indian territory. The Ringo Kid, **Wayne's** character, is a wanted murderer being taken to prison by a U. S. Marshall, **George Bancroft**. As the others pointedly shun the prostitute Dallas, he insists on her being given a drink of water and a place at the table, and his courtliness is manly and good-hearted. Of course he falls in love with her, and it inspires one of the great scenes.

The way **Wayne** speaks embodies his effortless authority. He says it and you don't doubt he means it. Indeed, the impression he makes here suggests he was perhaps lucky to avoid such a high-visibility role earlier in his career. He was 32 when he made this film, tall and slim, and had outgrown the almost improbable boyish beauty of his youth. He could growl and take a position and hold his ground and not talk too much, and he always sounded like he meant it.

**Ford** made certain through casting and dialog that the purpose of each scene was made clear, and then he lingered exactly long enough to make the point. Nothing feels superfluous. **Ford** never makes the mistake of cutting so quickly that the sense and context of an action sequence is lost. The extended stagecoach chase always makes sense, and he allows his camera to be clear about the stunt work. Consider this extraordinary stunt: An Apache (**Yakima Canutt**) leaps from his own horse onto the stagecoach team, straddling the lead horses. He is shot. He falls between the horses to the ground, and the horses and stagecoach pass entirely over him. No CGI here; he risks his life.

**Wayne** is the hero of the film, but not an "action hero." He was manifestly a bad man; the "Ringo Kid" doesn't get his picture on wanted posters for nothing. But he never suggests evil, and seems prepared to be taken to prison even though he has many opportunities to escape. There is the suggestion he stays with the stagecoach because he is needed to protect its passengers, especially the two women. We see here **Wayne's** extraordinary physical grace and capacity for tenderness.

Much of the movie is shot on location in **Ford's** beloved **Monument Valley**, its prehistoric rock pillars framing the smallness of men. **Ford** returned again and again to the valley, where he valued the distance from meddling studio executives. He was a dictator, and in that vastness his word was law.

The film's attitudes toward **Native Americans** are unenlightened. The **Apaches** are seen simply as murderous savages; there is no suggestion the white men have invaded their land or committed atrocities against them. **Ford** shared that simple view with countless other makers of Westerns, and if it was crude in 1939 it was even more so as late as "*The Searchers*" (1956), the greatest **Ford/Wayne** collaboration. Only in his final film, "*Cheyenne Autumn*" (1964) did he come around to more humane ideas.

**Ford** was not a racist, nor was **Wayne**, but they made films that were sadly unenlightened. Within "*Stagecoach*," however, beats a humanitarian heart: None of the occupants of the coach is taken for granted or dismissed casually. They are all given full weight in their mutual dependence. This is a very civilized Western.

**FINAL IMPRESSIONS ABOUT NATIVE PEOPLE FROM THIS FILM? + OR -**

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