

Marathon of the Masters: John Ford

A campfire could have crackled to life in front of the eight participants in "Remembering John Ford: A Panel Discussion With Those Who Knew Him" on the stage of Theater One in the Directors Guild of America on May 6 and it would have been completely appropriate as the great and famously cantankerous director's co-workers warmly paid him homage and told a few stories out of school.

The six-time Academy Award-winning director, who also won the

DGA Award for theatrical direction for *The Quiet Man* (1952) as well as the D.W. Griffith Award in 1954, was the subject of a daylong tribute organized by the DGA's Special Projects Committee.

Eleven Ford productions were screened, including a rarely exhibited silent, *The Iron Horse* (1924), as well as a newly restored print of the silent World War I melodrama, *Four Sons* (1928). Lost in its original form for 70 years, it was rediscovered in a vault in Portugal.

The panel discussion was introduced by DGA President Jack Shea, who noted that nearly all of Ford's films made before 1921 have been lost. Ford made 136 pictures, 23 of which won Oscars.

Ford was elected the first president of the Motion Picture Directors Association in 1927 and was one of the dozen directors who met in director King Vidor's home in 1936 to form the Screen Director's Guild, the direct forerunner of the DGA. As a poet of the moving image for 53 years, he was



DGA President Jack Shea (left), film critic Leonard Maltin, Michael Wayne (right) and guest. (Photo: Joe Coomber)

responsible for the way in which many Americans see their past, but he was also greatly responsible for founding and nurturing the DGA, especially during turbulent times. At a particularly divisive Guild meeting in 1950, he stood up and declared, "My name's John Ford — I make Westerns," and effectively stopped a faction of the Guild from smearing SDG President Joseph L. Mankiewicz.

The panel discussion illuminated both the legend and the man, his methods and madness, highlighted by the memories of Maureen O'Hara, who starred in five Ford pictures.

"On *The Quiet Man*, we had a scene on the beach in which he had a wind machine blowing in my face," O'Hara said. "My hair was lashing my eyeballs and I was squinting. I had to squint all day long and I had enough. I finally said, 'What would a bald-headed

son of a bitch like you know about hair lashing across your eyeballs?!' I about had a heart attack. I thought he was going to kill me.

"And like that, he cased every face on the set, every crew member he looked at. Then he made his decision whether to kill me or laugh. And he laughed. And everyone on the set started screaming with laughter. And that's John Ford ... wise, kind, gentle, wonderful, terribly lonesome, insecure, a great director, a fabulous cameraman. With John Ford, all you can do is accept him with all of his faults and love him."

Joining O'Hara for the hour-long discussion were moderator Scott Eyman, who wrote *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford*; DGA member and Ford grandson Dan Ford, who wrote *Pappy: The Life of John Ford*; and actors Rod Taylor, Carroll Baker, Gloria Stuart, Anna Lee Nathan and

Darryl Hickman.

Also in the audience were other Ford film veterans, including actors Constance Towers, Dorris Bowdon Johnson, Tige Andrews, Betsy Palmer and Shirley Mills as well as John Wayne's son, producer Michael Wayne. Also attending were David Carradine, whose father, John Carradine, played supporting parts in ten Ford films, initially in *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936), and Nathan Juran, who with Richard Day won Oscars for the interior decoration of *How Green Was My Valley* (1941).

Ford won Oscars for feature directing for *The Informer* (1935), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Quiet Man*. His other Oscars were for best documentary, *The Battle of Midway* (1942) and *December 7th* (1943), about the Japanese aerial attack on Pearl Harbor.

"You would come in, in the morning and go off in a corner, sit in a circle and run lines," O'Hara said of Ford's working methods. "Then he'd go off on the set and talk to the cameraman, 'Put the marks here, there. That's your mark, there's your mark... Now, get up there and do the scene.' He knew the script so well. The discipline was that when he called your name, you had to answer or God help you. And the answer was always 'Yo!' As long as you did that, you were fine. But he never did what some other directors did, who stifled you, put chains on you, tell you to walk in, look left, lift your finger — oh God.

"John Ford took the chains off. He let you do anything you wanted to do. But you were so in tune with what he was doing and with what the film meant that you became a part of it. When you'd do the scene, you'd look to him and he'd say, 'A little bit more' or 'Uh uh, cut it down.' Then he'd say, 'all right, roll.' He'd say, 'Cut. Next setup.' And you were thrilled with the fact that he accepted it, liked it and approved it. You

only ever asked, 'Did I do too much?' But we never went into details of how you moved or what you did, how you cocked your head or any of that rubbish."

Rod Taylor, who starred in *Young Cassidy* (1965) recalled a scene in which he was required to weep over the death of Cassidy's mother.

"I kind of trod across the rubble and went to cry," he said. "I drew the tweed cap off of my head and I had a little weep. And I wept. And wept. And shuddered and wept. I wept. I thought, 'Isn't the son of a bitch going to tell me to exit?' I got up, put my hat on, and walked slowly to where I knew the camera couldn't follow me.

"Then I went up to the camera and said, 'Jesus Christ, Jack — enough

about time for the pubs to be open."

Carroll Baker told of being upbraided by Ford on *How the West Was Won* (1963), which he co-directed with Henry Hathaway and George Marshall. He told her to drag her scarf in a scene of quiet grief. "It's called a motion picture," she remembered him saying, "Now you're in motion." A year later, on *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), Baker said, "He terrified me. I played a Quaker girl and I was in charge of the Indian children. For six weeks I drove everything from a buckboard to a stagecoach, and Pappy called me over to the side and said, 'You're responsible for all of these Indian children. They don't swim and we have rivers to cross. I want you to know I hold you personally

was a shot from the mountain. I'm riding a buckboard and we go through a river in the middle of this shot. I was taught never to fight the river, go with the current. Well, it started to pull us and I went with it. Two stunt men dressed as Indians came alongside and tried to pull me straight across the river and I took my whip and hit them. And Pappy froze the shot.

"It took him forever to come down from the mountain. I was so terrified. He took a long chew on his handkerchief, just looking at me. Finally, he said, 'What were you doing? You know what I photographed? I photographed a Quaker girl hitting the Indians with a whip.' He let me hang for the longest time. Then he said, 'But you saved the lives of those children, didn't you?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'OK — next shot.'"

Ford's inventiveness sometime came with a naughty angle. He told then 7-year-old Darryl Hickman, playing a hayseed youth in *The Grapes of Wrath*, to flush the first flush toilet the kid supposedly had seen, then run out of the restroom as if the noise had meant that he broke it. "It's my favorite scene of my own scenes in the movie," Hickman said. "I don't think it was in the script. He just made it up."

Dan Ford, who says his grandfather was "apolitical" despite his association with right wingers John Wayne and Ward Bond, recalled that "He was always reading, had a fascination for history and was nocturnal. He'd eat ice cream in bed with two little dachshunds that slept on the bed with him."

O'Hara recalled Ford's inventiveness where it's most remembered, on the screen. "We were doing a scene in *How Green Was My Valley*," she said, "with Walter Pidgeon and myself in the kitchen.... The scene was ready to go and the camera was set up. And he said, 'Let me look at the camera.' He said, 'Drop it three notches.' And they did. And he said, 'Now I want to see



From left, standing: Dan Ford, author Scott Eyman, Maureen O'Hara, Carroll Baker, Darryl Hickman, Gloria Stuart and Rod Taylor. Sitting: Anna Lee Nathan. (Photo: Joe Coomber)

is enough!' And he got up and kicked me in the shins, and said to me, 'You Australian son of a bitch! You made me cry. That's a wrap!' He knew it was

responsible for those children.'

"One of the first shots took all morning to set up with all of the Indians and all of the cavalry," Baker said. "It

the shadow of that chair — an old-fashioned kitchen chair — to be three times its size on the wall behind them.' He was an artist, he was a painter, he was a great director... That scene is beautiful — the huge shadow of the chair on the wall."

In 1944 Ford and O'Hara agreed on a handshake deal witnessed by director Frank Borzage to make *The Quiet Man* with John Wayne. Seven years later they raised the money from Republic Pictures and went to Ireland after the proviso that the same principals, including producer Merian C. Cooper and Victor McLaglen, first make a Western for the studio, which became *Rio Grande* (1950).

"In those days, the contracts were ten-plus-two, meaning ten weeks plus two more for overruns," O'Hara recalled. "Duke got \$100,000 for the picture and I got \$75,000. And we did it in ten weeks. And Ford sent Merian Cooper to Duke and I to get back two weeks' pay. I'm not going to tell you what Duke said. I can only tell you that I seconded what he said. Ford loved to torment me, and he always tried to get me mad."

Historian/film critic Leonard Maltin and Schawn Beltson, director of film preservation at 20th Century Fox, discussed the restoration of *Four Sons* after the panel discussion, and the film was shown.

Also shown during the day were Ford home movies and government films, *The Lost Patrol* (1934), *Pilgrimage* (1933), *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Quiet Man*, *The Searchers* (1956), *Rookie of the Year*, which Ford did for TV's Screen Directors Playhouse in 1955, the documentaries *Directed by John Ford* (1971, by Peter Bogdanovich) and *A Turning of the Earth: John Ford, John Wayne and the Searchers* (1999, by Nick Redman), as well as a never-aired interview conducted with Ford in 1968 by the BBC. ❦ —Jerry Roberts