

American Shakespeare?

March 17, 2012

A number of people will find it absurd to compare anybody involved in modern cinema with one of the greatest poets and dramatists of all time, but St. Patrick's Day may be the right moment to commemorate a great son of Ireland, the American film-director John Ford (1895–1973), by pointing out a few similarities between his career and that of William Shakespeare (1564–1616). A John Ford may be as close as our poor modern age can get to producing a Shakespeare – let's see:–

To begin with, both men were highly successful popular entertainers. Shakespeare set out to write not English Literature but scripts for the Globe Theatre company, always in need of new plays to put on stage. Between 1592 and his exile from the London stage less than 20 years later, he wrote some 35 plays of all kinds: history plays, comedies, tragedies, romances. They were all popular, because Shakespeare was so involved in the Globe Theatre and so close to its audience. As for John Ford, to satisfy the insatiable demand of the American film-going public for new films, between 1917 and 1970 he directed, with a company of actors appearing repeatedly, over 140 films, which mix, like Shakespeare, comic and serious, high life and low life. Many of these films were great box-office hits, because Ford like Shakespeare knew his public.

Both men were highly successful because they were story-tellers, stories being the heart of popular entertainment. Both men grip their audiences and hold them in suspense – what happens next? And as story-tellers can have considerable influence, so both men helped to mould their nations' character. By his history plays acting as propaganda for the recently established Tudor dynasty, Shakespeare has permanently influenced Englishmen's view of themselves coming

out of the Middle Ages. Ford likewise had a keen sense of American history (e.g. *The Last Hurrah*), and by creating the myth of the "Western" that fabricated America's "Wild West," he so defined the American national character as to have made people associate Americans with cowboys ever since.

Both men served a serious apprenticeship to their craft, Shakespeare on the boards of the Globe Theatre, Ford by spending several years as a cameraman before graduating to the direction of films. Shakespeare as a poet is an incomparable wordsmith, yet Ford's poetry might be his camera work. Film directors without number have watched his films to learn how to use the camera because Ford had an eye for the detailed composition of his pictures in movement, or "movies." When asked to name the film directors who most appealed to him, another famous film director, Orson Wells, replied, "I like the old masters, by which I mean John Ford, John Ford and John Ford." Yet another film-maker compared Ford's films for the "simplicity and strength" of their style to middle-period Beethoven!

Finally both men were Catholics. The deepest drama of Shakespeare's plays arises surely from his Catholic sense, necessarily disguised, of the tragedy of Merrie England's irreversible slide into apostasy. John Ford was the tenth of eleven children of two immigrants to the United States, both born in Catholic Ireland. No doubt the Faith of his ancestors enabled him to commemorate the relative innocence and decency of yesterday's America, with its womanly women, and its manly and upright heroes as typified in Ford's films by John Wayne. A king of modern cinema may never make it to the Pantheon of all-time greats alongside a Shakespeare, but John Ford was that modern king.

Thank you, Ireland, and America. Happy St. Patrick's Day to both of you!

Kyrie eleison.