The Grey Fox

As Bill Miner Richard Farnsworth has an authentic period face.

The Grey Fox, a training film (nounsintended) on how to operate a film camera. The incident happened when the hero rode off into the sunset July, partially because of the framing and chiaroscuro clouded over by Gordon Willis, and most of all, because the actor, Richard Farnsworth, is virtually the only character in the film who is not a poseur, an ideological position, but rather has a chance to develop a character.

Now Farnsworth has an entire film built around him and he proves himself worthy of every bit of the extravagant beauty that director Phillip Borsos has lavished on The Grey Fox.

From the opening moments that Bill Miner, a daring stage coach robber, having spent thirty years in prison was released for the chance to develop a character. The Grey Fox starts out looking like that most worn-out variation on the Western genre, the "last outlaw" film, with a weathered outlaw that is tied down and eliminated by the grinding weight of a numerically and technologically superior society that wants nothing more than to stamp out the last vestiges of individuality in the pursuit of a modern conformity.

What is happening is much more interesting than standing as the last archaic individual. Bill Miner is the first Western outlaw to be inspired by technology rather than fame, and the inspiration is the movies. Having moved north to Washington state to live with his sister and her husband, he is earning a living picking oysters from the Puget Sound mud flats, when one evening he decides to take in the nickelodeon, and sees The Great Train Robbery.

The nickelodeon scene is outstanding in its recreation of the sheer physical excitement created by the first movies. Remember, this is less than a decade after a Paris audience fled screaming at the Lumiere Brothers’ Arrivée du Train, a time when the film industry did not quite know what to do with itself, watching a training film (nounsintended) on how to take up a new line of work.

The theme of technology’s wonder is picked up in the film’s very first scene, as Miner rides the train north. On the train is a salesman with a hot new line of labour-saving devices, most notably a mechanical apple peeler. When the salesman opines that there is an unlimited future in appliances, Miner replies that the old rooms that the future doesn’t mean much unless you’re talking about next year. West is carrying nothe the fascination glitter in his eye. When he purchases a gun, the light plays on the polished metal surfaces with a dark richness that suggests he is less the spiritual cousin of Dutch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid than the grandfather of Frank, the hero of Michael Mann’s Thief.

But Borsos and his art director, Bill Brode, do something very interesting with the relationship between The Grey Fox and the old movie myths. The intercutting of old, silent, black and white footage into the film is not merely a cute cutting of old, silent, black and white movie mythology versus the reality of the event and a flash of memory, as Miner remembers the conclusion and decides not to do anything seriously stupid.

There are other flashes of period authenticity, like the stiff armed, awkward stance of the Northwest Mounted Police-men who capture the gang, and the nascent nationalism of Corporal Pernie (Timothy Webber), who does not see why he should co-operate with an American Pinkerton detective (Gary Beisei), in a role that uses well his gift for quietly understated menace.

Borsos has also filled The Grey Fox with authentically period faces, especially Richard Farnsworth and Jackie Burroughs. Farnsworth, a stuntman for almost forty years before beginning an acting career in Mark Rydell’s The Cowboys, is one of those rare screen naturals whose character shines through his face. He invests Bill Miner with a sly humour and open charm that would have been denied the film had Peter O’Brien and Borsos gone through with their original casting plan of Harry Dean Stanton, whose specialty is snax-neen, redneck craziness.

The film’s major revolution, though, is the sublime Jackie Burroughs, who has no revolution at all to those of us who saw her in George Cukor’s The First American (from Maggie Smith at Stanford in the mid-1960’s). The fact that Burroughs, who has been working in this country for over a decade, has had to wait this long for a major film role is yet one more instance of how shabbily the native acting community has been treated by the tax shelter producers in general.