

REVIEWS

Phillip Borsos' **The Grey Fox**

The Western, the oldest of all film genres, has developed such mythological depth in the eighty years since *The Great Train Robbery* that even a bad Western is capable of throwing off haunting images as easily as breathing.

In Alan J. Pakula's somnolent modern Western, *Comes a Horseman*, for instance, an aging ranch hand finds that his arthritis and the cold of the morning have conspired to render him incapable of mounting his horse without the aid of a kitchen chair. There is something astounding and heartbreaking there, partially because of its relationship to the myth of the carefree, vagabond cowboy (whatever happened to the boys in the bunkhouse when the hero rode off into the sunset?), partially because of the framing and chiaroscuro lighting provided by Gordon Willis, and most of all, because the actor, Richard Farnsworth, is virtually the only character in the film who does not represent 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*.

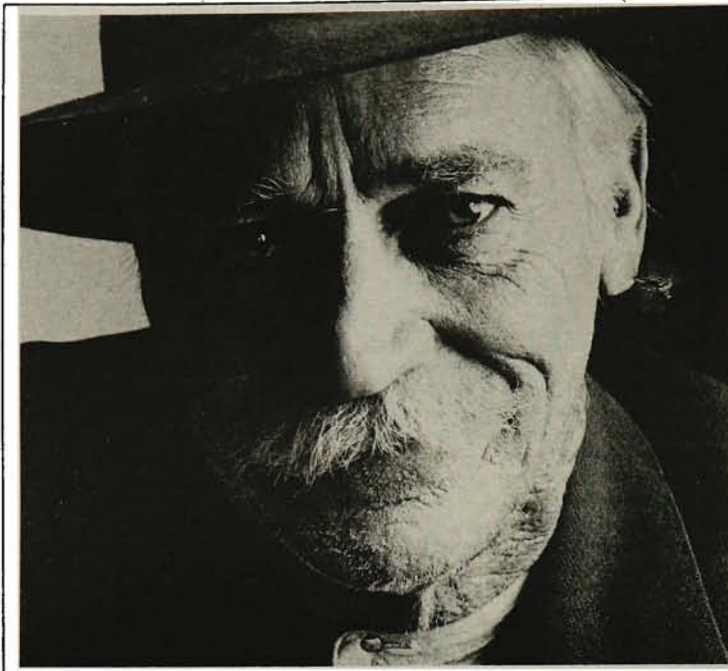
A title card informs us that Bill Miner, a daring stage coach robber, having spent thirty years in prison was released into the twentieth century.

The Grey Fox starts out looking like that most worn-out variation on the Western genre, the "last outlaw" film, where the final outlaw is tracked down and eliminated by the grinding weight of a numerically and technologically superior society that wants nothing more than to stomp out the last vestiges of individuality in the pursuit of a modern conformism.

What is happening is much more interesting, however, because rather than standing as the last archaic individual, Bill Miner is the first Western outlaw to be inspired by technology rather than destroyed by it, and his 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 Lumière Brothers' *L'Arrivée du Train*, a time when the film industry did not yet exist in California, preferring the sunny shores of the Hudson River and Fort Lee, N.J. It is perhaps the best scene about the power of the moving image since Godard's *Les Carabiniers*, and since Miner had gotten out of crime because his specialty had dried up, his eyes are shining, half with excitement at the story, but half because he is watching a training film (no pun intended) 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 Bill Miner Richard Farnsworth has an authentic period face

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 "To a man my age, the future doesn't mean much unless you're talking about next week." Yet there is no denying the fascinated glitter in his eye. When he purchases a gun, the light plays on the polished metal surfaces with a dark richness that suggests Vermeer. Indeed, his suggestion to a punk that "A professional always specializes" and his use of dynamite sticks to blow open train doors suggests that he is less the spiritual cousin of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid than the grandfather of Frank, the hero of Michael Mann's *Thief*.

But Borsos and his art director, Bill Brodie, 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 device, but a method of commenting on mythology and a way of emphasizing the visual organization of *The Grey Fox* as a silent film. For a Western, there are two things which are very odd about the film — its location and the newness of the buildings. Filmed in the northern woods, it bears less resemblance to the sun-bleached California Westerns that have become our idea of the west (Monument Valley, etc.) and more resemblance to *The Great Train Robbery* (the forests of New Jersey). The newness of the buildings suggests a much more realistic frontier — is there anything more ludicrous than to see a movie set in the frontier's wide open spaces where all the buildings look as if they are a hundred years old?

The art direction contributes thoroughly to this feeling that we are watching a silent film by building a set of high-ceilinged rooms that suggest old movie sets yet, by underdecorating them, avoiding the overstuffed look that characterizes the Masterpiece Theatre school of period melodrama. The high-ceilinged

rooms recreate the impression of watching characters rattle about in spaces slightly too large, a hallmark of movies that were made in ceilingless sets to allow the sun in.

Thus, when we see the fatal climax of *The Great Train Robbery* just before the capture of Bill Miner's band of desperadoes, it seems to be an economic shortcut to shooting an actual climax, but turns out to be a commentary on the 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 Fernie (Timothy Webber), who does not see why he should co-operate with an American Pinkerton detective (Gary Reineke, 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 speciality is snake-mean, redneck craziness.

The film's major revelation, though, is the sublime Jackie Burroughs, who is no revelation at all to those of us who saw her steal scenes from Maggie Smith at Statford in the mid-1980'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.

Playing a bluestocking suffragette (the period is too early to call her a feminist) who is wont to make pronouncements to the town's newspaperman on the need for the equality of women, Burroughs suggests Katherine Hepburn at her best, and her romance with Farnsworth has a rare warmth and an intelligent maturity that fits with the characters and their times.

Phillip Borsos' first feature film (following several documentaries) is clearly the work of a major talent. He has, with cinematographer Frank Tidy (and operator Ron Orioux, DOP on *The Hounds of Notre Dame*), created a Western film that looks as if it might have been filmed by Werner Herzog — it has the same misty, mystical clarity of image. It honours the genre while commenting on that genre's rambunctious mythology, not in the name of realism (which is just another of the 97 orders of stylization), but in the name of historical and a formal re-evaluation of that mythology, denying the possibility of the wild west in the midst of the peaceable kingdom, while admitting that kingdom's possible appeal to an aging outlaw who is tired of running.

John Harkness ●

THE GREY FOX p. Peter O'Brian d. Phillip Borsos co-p. Phillip Borsos, Barry Healey exec. p. David H. Brady assoc. p. asst. d. John Board p. man. Paul Tucker sc. John Hunter d.o.p. Frank Tidy, B.S.C. p. des. Bill Brodie orig. score Michael Conway Baker traditional Irish music composed and performed by The Chieftains ed. Frank Irvine, C.F.E. consulting film ed. Ralph Rosenblum sup. sd. ed. Bruce Nyznik casting Walker Bowen Inc. cost. des. Christopher Ryan camera op. Ron Orioux loc. sd. rec. Rob Young art d. Ian Thomas asst. art d. David Willson set dec. Kimberley Richardson set dresser Ann Marie Corbett asst. set dresser Christine MacLean props master Grant Swain props buyer Bill Thumm make-up sup. Alona Herman make-up artist Phyllis Newman ward. Jane Grose ward. asst. Linda Langdon seamstress Gillian McNeil cost. co-ord. Charles Leittrants scenic artist Richard Humenick draftsman Michael Ritter hd. carpenter Thom Wells hd. painter Susan High carpenters John Miller, Jim Armstrong, Brian Collins, David Tait, Paul Willson art dept. asst. Kajja, Jeremy Borsos key focus Sandy McCallum asst. cam. Bruce Ingram boom B.J. Clayden gaffer John Bartley best boy Len Wolfe gen. op. Steve Jackson key grip Tim Hogan best boy grip Barry Reid dolly grip John Brown grip Jim Hurford asst. eff. John Thomas, Cliff Wenger best boy sp. eff. Rex Cooley craft serv./first aid Joanne Ryan unit loc. man. Michael Steele 2nd asst. d. Mary Ellis 3rd. asst. d. Tom Rowe trainee asst. d. Wendy McGillivray p. co-ord. Patrice Allen p. acct. Elizabeth Pontas asst. acct. Victoria Emery p. office asst. Debbie Hlady sc. sup. Les Walking sd. rec. Joe Grimaldi, Austin Grimaldi ed. eff. ed. Peter Thillaye asst. sd. ed. Michele Moses asst. eff. ed. Gordon Thompson dialogue ed. Anthony Currie asst. dialogue ed. Catherine Hunt Foley artist Andy Malcolm asst. Foley artist Peter McBernie asst. ed. Maureen Levitt post-p. asst. Nigel Hollick neg. cut. Ingrid Rosen trans. co-ord. Scott Irvine driver captain George Griev driver co-captain Rocky Cantolas drivers Brian Boyer, Drew Neville, David Bowe, Al Brown chef/driver Bonnie Reis hd. wrangler Tom Glass wranglers Richard Cosgrave, Dennis Houser, Doug Lauder livestock & wagons John Scott Motion Picture Animals guns Tom Bongalis p.r. David Novek & Assoc. unit pub. Elizabeth Blomme stills Phillip Hersee, Christopher Heicermans-Benge administration asst. Sandra Gould Sale. Kate McBride, Linda Baca p.c. Mercury Pictures running time 93 min. color 35mm dist. United Artist Classics (Cda & U.S.) l.p. Richard Farnsworth, Jackie Burroughs, Ken Pogue, Timothy Webber, Gary Reineke, Wayne Robson, David Petersen, Don Mackey, Samantha Langevin, Tom Heaton, James McLarty, George Dawson, Ray Michal, Stephen E. Miller, David L. Crowley, David McCulley, Gary Chalk, Jack Leaf, Isaac Hislop, Sean Sullivan, Bill Murdock, Jack Ackroyd, Nicholas Rice, Frank Turner, Bill Meilen, David Raines, Paul Jolicœur, Mel Tuck, Peter Jobin, David Ackridge, Paul Whitney, Murray Ord, Tom Glass, Anthony Holland, Jon York, John Owen, Lisa Westman.