

SAVANT BOOK REVIEW

Tuesday December 5, 2017

Hello!

A **Book Review** today, and a very positive one. Good books about film directors are not easy to come by, and when a real winner surfaces like Bernard Eisenschitz's book on Nicholas Ray or Foster Hirsch's on Otto Preminger, I take notice. Joining those for reference-quality value and getting an A+ for sheer entertainment, Alan K. Rode's [Michael Curtiz: A Life in Film](#) is engaging from the start and doesn't let up. Curtiz is different because he was never a cult director or one likely to be studied from an academic viewpoint — he was an artisan that for the bulk of his career worked at just one studio. But he had a terrific, recognizable style and made more 'great' golden age Hollywood pictures than anybody — Errol Flynn swashbucklers, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Casablanca*, *Mildred Pierce*, *White Christmas* among them. He wasn't an outright rebel or a hyphenate that generated his own scripts; he didn't have highly personal themes to express. He also did everything — high adventure, literary adaptations, tense thrillers, 'women's dramas' and even light comedies. Although Curtiz tangled with his studio bosses Jack Warner and Hal Wallis as much as anybody, before this book all I really knew about him was that he had made silent films in Hungary, and that he tied mogul Sam Goldwyn for quoted malapropisms, the most famous being "*Bring on the empty horses,*" from *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

With a sure hand, good research and a knack for amusing ironies, author Rode really brings Curtiz to life. Much of the book is entirely new material. The chapters about his life and work in Hungary are a revelation, what with marriages to famous actresses (one of them may have been star Lili Damita) and the artful way Curtiz managed to keep directing despite the wartime upheavals and political intrigues of the 1920s.

Curtiz himself is a real piece of work, a filmmaking maniac who worked crews 'round the clock and would do almost anything to make a picture better. Plenty of directors could be called short-tempered bullying autocrats, but Curtiz was at times genuinely sadistic. It's *documented* that he purposely put actors and extras in mortal danger while filming, and not just in the famous silent picture [Noah's Ark](#). Screen legend tells us that several extras drowned in Curtiz's irresponsible flood scenes. It's also been handed down that Curtiz killed horses left and right with lethal stunts in battle scenes. Rode has dug deep enough to debunk most of the mayhem. We also find out that Curtiz was never a studio hack, filming whatever he was handed. He was constantly in Dutch with his bosses for changing things, inventing new scenes and rewriting dialogue. Some of his pictures ran over budget and time because of his perfectionism, but nobody could deny that the results were spectacular. Many of the moments that make pictures like *The Adventures of Robin Hood* or *The Sea Wolf* so good were put in place by the director, at the last moment.

Rode pegs *Yankee Doodle Dandy* as the picture in which Curtiz's archenemy Hal Wallis realized that the director's constant changes were what were making his movies work so well. Rode also identifies a major contributor to Curtiz's work: his wife Bess Meredyth was an accomplished screenwriter, and ghosted script revisions for him, often at the last minute.

I've seen entire books about the making of some of these pictures, but Rode's accounts are a better read, for several reasons. His more discerning research makes a big difference. The annotations show us that he's sought out really obscure sources, definitely so for the European chapters. The book routinely quotes from unpublished biographies, personal papers on file in archives, etc. Rode also writes with an authoritative voice that steers past obvious *Hollywood Babylon*-type material to get at the real issues. Some of the details are pretty salacious anyway — the ballyhoo train to promote *Dodge City* brought along actors, publicity men and invited members of the press — along with two prostitutes to keep the entertainment reporters from molesting the young actresses. Now, didn't that train cross state lines?

The book separates the legend from the reality, in a business abounding in myth. How many times have I read that George Raft and Ronald Reagan almost played Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*? Rode doesn't just reject useless studio publicity sources, he often compares multiple accounts. He ferrets out the likely true sequence of events of how *Casablanca* came to be, what with producers, actors and writers all claiming to have brought the property to the studio. Rode also straightens out a lot of apocryphal so-called history from the memoirs of big stars. Errol Flynn's book seems to have gotten almost everything wrong. Flynn even identifies the fight-choking incident that ended his collaboration with Curtiz, as not even happening on their last movie together.

Rode's realistic appraisal of studio politics sizes up personalities and judges trends — such as the effect of wartime shortages — with the assurance of someone who has been weighing the evidence for years. Curtiz comes off just as one might expect, as a martinet who made a lot of enemies but cared intensely about his work, and played studio politics in a way that made him invaluable to his employer. Whenever there was a break in assignments, he'd step in to finish somebody else's film, or do random retakes.

As Warners' top contract director Michael Curtiz worked with the biggest stars, the book covers portions of their careers as well. Bette Davis and James Cagney fought to be compensated properly for the millions they brought in at the box office, and more importantly to be assigned decent roles. Curtiz directed a frustrated Olivia de Havilland on several pictures where she was cast as an accessory for Errol Flynn.

Jimmy Cagney dodged the proto-blacklist by making the ultra-patriotic *Yankee Doodle Dandy* but was still so unhappy with his position at Warners that he left the studio a second time.

A Life at Film settles into a pattern of one-picture-after-another because that was Curtiz's life; almost nothing else claimed his attention. Rode's fascinating account continues into the director's post-Warners years, where he worked on Biblical epics in the new CinemaScope format, directed the first VistaVision film and even directed one of Elvis Presley's best pictures, *King Creole*. Perhaps the most fascinating chapter is about [Mission to Moscow](#), a wartime whitewash of the Soviet Union and Stalin packed with lies and distortions. Curtiz mostly held his nose while directing it, but I haven't read as good (and fair) an account of its making anywhere. Rode's discussions of the earlier anti-fascist controversies and the postwar anti-communist witch hunts convey the full trauma of the time.

Rode's approach to the workings of Hollywood will seem fresh to well-read film fans, without shutting out more casual readers. The slice of studio history covered incorporates quite a few beloved classics, so it's wholly accessible. The book plays like an epic character study, not a stack of movie trivia facts — we learn what really mattered to the greats Cagney, Flynn, Davis, de Havilland, Crawford, Bogart. Rode invests the material with a winning author's personality. He leverages his carefully vetted research to involve the reader in determining which legendary Hollywood tall tales — and funny malapropisms — are actually true. From the University of Kentucky Press, [Michael Curtiz: A Life in Film](#) puts Alan K. Rode in with today's best writers on film. The book is a keeper that will go on the 'read again soon' shelf. —

Alan Rode will be hosting a gala [book signing / Michael Curtiz double bill](#) at the Egyptian Theater on this Thursday, the 7th ... the movies to be shown are terrific: *The Sea Wolf* and *The Breaking Point*.

The [vital info is here](#).

Thanks for reading! — Glenn Erickson