

CLARENCE BROWN

Although he trained as an engineer and expected to pursue a career in the automotive industry, Clarence Brown became enamoured of the burgeoning new industry of filmmaking around 1914 and switched careers. The Massachusetts-born, Tennessee-raised Brown became an assistant to director Maurice Tourneur at Peerless Studio in New Jersey. Following WWI (during which he served as a flying instructor), he rejoined Tourneur and got his first chance to direct a film when his mentor fell ill during the shooting of "The Last of the Mohicans" (1920). Later that year, Brown made his solo directing debut with "The Great Redeemer", co-written by actor John Gilbert.

Influenced by Tourneur's use of romantic imagery, Brown was soon put under contract by Universal, where he honed his craft with efforts like "Smouldering Fires" and "The Goose Woman," both of which featured a romantic triangle, a theme that would recur in the director's oeuvre. Leaving Universal, he joined United Artists where he directed Rudolph Valentino in the charming romantic comedy "The Eagle" (1925) and the Norma Talmadge vehicle "Kiki" (1926). Executives at MGM were impressed enough to offer a contract and in 1926 Brown joined the studio where he would flourish.

MGM had carved its niche with a series of opulent, star-studded productions and Brown managed to retain his own unique vision while working within the studio's "house style". As a director, he tended to get out of the performer's way, preferring to offer suggestions that helped elicit the actor's best. His first assignment at MGM proved fortuitous: he was selected to direct Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in the romantic melodrama "Flesh and the

Devil" (1926). Brown soon became the actress' preferred director, guiding her through a half-dozen more films including the silent "Romance" (1930) and Garbo's first talking picture "Anna Christie" (also 1930), based on the



Eugene O'Neill play. Brown ended up competing against himself for the Best Director Academy Award for both efforts, but lost.

Having proven his abilities with the difficult Garbo, Brown soon specialized

in guiding many of MGM's strong-willed divas. Norma Shearer did some of her best work under his direction ("A Free Soul" 1931; "The Idiot's Delight" 1939) and Joan Crawford clamored to collaborate with him on such projects as

"Possessed" (1931) and "The Gorgeous Hussy" (1936). He also continued his association with Garbo, steering her through "Anna Karenina" (1935) and "Conquest" (1937).

Following the untimely death of

Irving Thalberg, MGM head Louis B. Mayer selected Brown to produce and direct a number of films that specifically appealed to the mogul, films that emphasized traditional values. Rising to the challenge, the director helmed such efforts as "Of Human Hearts" (1938), the biopic "Edison the Man" (1940), Mayer's personal favorite, "The Human Comedy" (1943), adapted from William Saroyan's novel, the overlong war drama "The White Cliffs of Dover" (1944), and "National Velvet" (1945). (Ironically, though, on loan to 20th Century Fox in 1939, Brown made what is arguably his best film, "The Rains Came", a drama about self-centered Brits in India who redeem themselves after a natural disaster strikes.)

Following WWII, Brown's output slowed. He earned his sixth career Oscar nomination for Best Director for "The Yearling" (1946), a well-acted adaptation of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' novel about a young boy who adopts a fawn as a pet. In 1950, he produced and directed the superb "Intruder in the Dust", an adaptation of a William Faulkner novel about racial tolerance that was clearly out of sync with MGM's "house style". Harsh but sensitive, "Intruder in the Dust" tackled a controversial subject and perfectly captured the nuances of small-town bigotry. As a follow-up, the director turned to fancy with "Angels in the Outfield", a charming fantasy about a baseball team that may have benefited from divine intervention.

The following year, Brown directed his last film, "Plymouth Adventure", a drama about the arrival of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts. He retired and lived off his real estate investments until his death in 1987 aged 97.

by Mohaiminul Islam

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