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Yellow Sky

(Fox Home Entertainment, 5.23.2006)

In the age of Chris Columbus and Brett Ratner, it may be hard to believe that Hollywood once consistently turned out smoothly professional films. In the forties, even routine assignments were handled with great care by studio directors, craftsmen who took their jobs seriously. William Wellman's 1948 *Yellow Sky* is a perfect example: interesting story, solid characters, good performances, excellent use of location, skilled cinematography and editing. Nothing to get excited about, but a pleasant way to spend 98 minutes.

Stretch (Gregory Peck) is the laconic leader of a gang of bank robbers who escape from the pursuing cavalry by venturing across a vast salt desert and find themselves in the ghost town of Yellow Sky, once, according to a fallen sign, "the fastest growing town in the territory." Stretch's boys are about to give up and die of thirst until the unexpected appearance of Mike (Anne Baxter), a comely young woman who tells them where the town's spring is. Once refreshed, the outlaws decide that the only reason the girl and her grandpa (James Barton) have stayed behind must be gold and try to convince the pair to reveal its location.

Stretch's gang consists of the usual suspects. Dude (Richard Widmark) is the greedy one, out only for himself. Lengthy (John Russell) is the psycho, aiming to do unmentionable acts to Mike. Walrus (Charles Kemper) is the wacky old-timer. Bull Run (Robert Arthur) is the relatively innocent kid. Half Pint (Harry Morgan) is the follower of whoever seems currently in command. This collection is clichéd, of course, but Lamar Trotti's screenplay gives each actor a chance to stand out.

Although he became a bit stiff and pompous as he grew older, Peck gives good, naturalistic performances in several films from *Spellbound* (1945) to *Roman Holiday* (1953). In

Yellow Sky, he offers a variation on the outlaw he played two years earlier in King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*: men who have difficulty deciding if they are essentially good or bad. Though the film's source is a novel by W. R. Burnett, it is clearly inspired, like *Forbidden Planet*, by Shakespeare's "The Tempest," with Stretch a loose version of Caliban.

Baxter shows a spunkiness missing from most of her other roles, with the notable exception of *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Having a tomboy named Mike is an indication of the homoerotic element prevalent in Westerns long before *Brokeback Mountain*, playing to the confused I-want-a-girl-like-a-guy sexuality of many younger Western fans. Like a kid in a playground, Stretch woos Mike by knocking her down. The film's campy trailer announces, "Shoots like a man, fights like a tigress, responds to a kiss like a woman."

Wellman (*Nothing Sacred*, *The High and the Mighty*) is one of those directors who wasn't quite an artist and didn't have a particularly

distinctive style but could be counted on, like Andre de Toth, Henry Hathaway, and Richard Quine, to do a competent job most of the time. He uses the Death Valley location well, conveying the oppressive sense of heat. Five years before CinemaScope, Wellman and cinematographer Joe MacDonald give the march across the desert a widescreen feel by spacing out the horsemen as tiny figures in a white landscape. Wellman and Trotti, also the producer, make an interesting choice by having no music between the opening and closing credits to accentuate the emptiness of the setting.

In addition to the trailer, the extras include poster, production still, and behind-the-scenes galleries, with the latter desperately needing some text to identify what we are seeing. The transfer of the black-and-white film is adequate. While the daylight scenes lack detail, the night shots have a marvelous noirish texture.

--Michael Adams