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Review of The River's Edge

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The River's Edge
(Fox Home Entertainment, 7.11.2006)

Allan Dwan is one of the true pioneers of the movies, having worked on more than 350 films in all genres as director, writer, and producer from 1911 to 1961. He was even an assistant director on D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*. During the sound era, except for the relatively big-budget *Suez* in 1938, Dwan directed B-movies, creating nuances of style out of minimal budgets.

The River's Edge, released in 1957, represents a merging of genres: the western and film noir. As Ben Cameron (Anthony Quinn) struggles to make a go of his small cattle ranch, his restless wife, Meg (Debra Paget), is about to leave him when a mysterious stranger shows up. Nardo Denning (Ray Milland) claims to want Ben to lead him on a hunting trip into Mexico, but he's really on the run with stolen loot. We quickly learn that Ben married Meg just after he returned from the Korean War and she was released from prison. She is merely using him and longs for her former partner in crime who, it turns out, is Denning. Circumstances eventually find the three heading over the mountains into Mexico.

The much-underrated Milland made the transition from leading man to oily villain in the '50s, and here he offers a variation on his role in Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*. In both films, his character is constantly justifying questionable behavior. Denning makes excuses to Meg after committing two brutal murders and apparently trying to kill her as well.

Known for blustering macho types, Quinn is remarkably low key, trying to imbue Ben with a complexity missing from the screenplay. Even though Milland and Quinn were Oscar winners, they do not condescend to the material, giving solidly professional performances. In contrast, Paget, one of the era's leading starlets and later briefly Mrs. Budd Boetticher, overacts wildly in keeping with Meg's confusion and fears.

In their excellent commentary, noir experts James Ursini and Alain Silver talk about how Dwan tried to accentuate sexuality in his movies—this from a man who made two Shirley Temple pictures. He has Paget first appear in tight shorts and high heels, then in black lingerie that calls attention to two of her best features, and finally in a bubble bath. It is easy to see why Ben and Denning would be crazy about Meg.

Meg's flaming red hair is an echo of Dwan's *Slightly Scarlet*, a 1956 color noir featuring two redheads, Arlene Dahl, also just released from prison, and Rhonda Fleming. *Slightly Scarlet*, arguably Dwan's best effort, is based on a James M. Cain story, and *The River's Edge* resembles one of Cain's hot-blooded triangles. The commentators remark on its similarity to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, as well as the characters' complex motivations.

Good, lurid melodrama for its first two-thirds, *The River's Edge* gradually sinks a bit into clichés: a thunderstorm, a rattlesnake, an injury to one of the protagonists, a huge cave that appears just when it's needed. While admiring the director's ability to work around budget limitations, Silver and Ursini discuss Dwan's aversion to working on locations, and much of the trek to Mexico was shot on sets, helping to reduce the scale of the action.

The River's Edge is still of interest as an example of low-budget noir in Deluxe color CinemaScope. Dwan uses the widescreen effectively, especially when Denning tries to run down Meg with his pink Thunderbird convertible, and the vibrant colors—multiple shades of red, green, and blue—leap off the screen. The images created by the great John Alton for *Slightly Scarlet* are even more spectacular, though the VCI DVD is not of the same quality as Fox's excellent transfer of *The River's Edge*.

If only Fox's promotional people showed the same care. Inside the DVD case is an ad for upcoming Fox discs, including something called "Hemingway Classics Collection." I'm not sure who this chap Hemingway is, but I'm happy to hear Fox has collected his classics.—Michael Adams