

Why a book on Allan Dwan? His film output is staggeringly large and his directorial career began in 1911, just three years after D.W. Griffith completed his first film. But where Griffith's directorial career ended in 1931, Dwan's last release came 30 years later.

Yet, Dwan had to be re-discovered first by Kevin Brownlow, who interviewed him in 1964 for his celebrated history of the silent film in *The Parade's Gone By...*, and then be treated to a book-length interview by Peter Bogdanovich, which was published in 1971.

Although I had seen Allan Dwan movies long before I had any idea of who Allan Dwan was, the first time I recall seeing a reference to him was as an entry in Andrew Sarris' seminal book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions: 1929–1968*. There, classified under the heading "Expressive Esoterica," was this description: "Dwan's career is still being mined for a possibly higher assay of gold to dross. Recent findings — *Silver Lode*, *The Restless Breed*, *The River's Edge*— represent a virtual bonanza of hitherto unexplored classics. It is too early to establish any coherent pattern to Dwan's career as a whole, but it may very well be that Dwan will turn out to be the last of the old masters."

But how was it that Dwan could have been working since the dawn of commercial cinema and it was only in the mid-1960s that he had begun to be appreciated as one of the old masters, as if he had somehow been misplaced for decades?

Bogdanovich titled his book *The Last Pioneer* but I wondered if Dwan hadn't been the *lost* pioneer. Through the filter of Dwan's reminiscences, Bogdanovich fleshed out a directorial career that was virtually unknown to the burgeoning number of English-language readers who wanted to learn about cinema's past. Dwan's wit and amiability were so ingratiating that few cinephiles questioned if there was a more complex narrative behind his breezy storytelling. Forty years later, there has still not been a book-length critical study of his work and life although a book of essays about Dwan was published in conjunction with a Dwan tribute at the 2002 Locarno Film Festival. Despite his astonishing productivity, he has remained elusive to critics.

During the winter 2003 retrospective of twenty Dwan films at New York's Walter Reade Theater, Elliott Stein wrote in *The Village Voice*, "Dwan is hardly a subject for auteur analysis. He loved making movies, and would often shoot whatever came along. But he did his job with such economy and narrative flair that the most banal material could be transformed into something personal." But how is it that Dwan

is "hardly a subject for auteur analysis" while he could "transform the most banal material into something personal"? Isn't that part of a definition of what makes a director an auteur, particularly one working in an unfashionable genre? But both Dwan's themes and subject matter seemed too diffuse to be easily calibrated. With genres he seemed to operate like a whirling dervish, specializing, for example, in cinematic farce in the mid-1940s before switching to Republic and RKO with a hodgepodge of genres with Westerns dominating. Nor could the ambiance of his films be as easily summed up as, say, with Raoul Walsh and the love of adventure or Edgar G. Ulmer and his fatalism. Even more disconcerting, there was no cult masterpiece that could be used to "spin" his reputation, no *Rio Bravo*, no *White Heat* or *Detour*.

Dwan is something of an anomaly in how he allegedly entered the motion picture business both as an engineer and as a writer—a seemingly ideal combination for the technological requirements of the cinema. Dwan also developed a reputation as a problem-solver. He said he assisted D.W. Griffith in shooting one of his most famous sequences in *Intolerance* by putting an elevator on a railroad track so that it could go upwards and backwards at the same time. Dwan also had the same ability to evaluate scripts and decide how their weaknesses could be overcome, sometimes tilting a script previously considered "serious" more toward comedy.

There is indeed something of the scientist in Dwan's style. He knows the inner mechanics of each story and its visualization thoroughly. He can sometimes add meanings by extending the length of a shot beyond its ostensible function or by re-showing certain images. In this, he somewhat resembles the deist God who does not impose himself on his creations but lets their inner clockwork reveal himself. Some of his minor films seem to carry a spark that suggests something far greater.

In this approach may lay both Dwan's strengths and weaknesses. His careful intelligence usually prevents him from falling into the crudeness that characterizes some of the lesser films of say, Raoul Walsh. Yet, there is something of passionate outrageousness missing in Dwan's sensibility that made possible such Walsh masterpieces as *White Heat* and *High Sierra*.

Dwan is essentially a director without a masterpiece although arguably several of his films have come close to that status. There are certainly notable highlights throughout his career and in the silent era he was one of the highest regarded and most highly paid directors. (Some of his most impressive achievements of that era may be lost forever.) Yet one cannot

chart his career as moving toward that one towering opus that guarantees immortality. He seemed to be too preoccupied with doing his best for many lesser assignments.

A still more transcendent view of Dwan comes from the Austrian film critic Christoph Huber. In 2002 he wrote, "Probably the most exhilarating experience all year was the Locarno Film Festival's extensive retrospective for Allan Dwan, who seemed incapable of directing a movie badly. If the script was no good, he'd make an interesting movie, if the script was so-so, the film was near-great, if the script was good, the film was brilliant."

Huber's comments may smack of hyperbole and Dwan often did his best to have his scripts improved before they were shot. But as Huber suggests, Dwan brought careful planning and intelligence into the making of his films. The joy of the creative process seems to have been a sustaining force that guided him through such an astonishingly large output of work.

Under the strain of limited budgets, he would also find more artistic means to make his points. There were also tensions in his own personality that would help ignite the art in his work.

Like Walsh and Howard Hawks, Dwan claimed to have sworn off making consciously artistic or prestigious films early in his career. Yet there appear to have been at least three periods in the silent era where Dwan strove to make arty or "important" movies. While he ultimately abandoned that approach, he continued to fight throughout his career to maintain his independence as a director. In exchange, he would provide his employers with films made both economically and with commercial appeal. In the sound era, the cost of such an arrangement sometimes left Dwan with meager material to make his films. But he did not lose his knack of doing much with little, even if it earned him scant recognition. He also grasped (or convinced himself) that the fame he had won in the silent period could be a hindrance to longevity. Some of Dwan's most expressive films came late in his career, when few seemed to notice.

Dwan remained attuned to the basic rules of filmmaking he had learned early and which he felt served him with infinite variety. Those principles may have been far from old-fashioned for those who scrutinized them carefully. The film director John Sayles has stated, "There is one thing I learned from a book about screenwriting. There was an interview that Peter Bogdanovich did with Allan Dwan.... He had this rule, which I also use in my fiction writing, that if you drew lines of emotional connection between the characters, you had to have at least two coming from every person."

Bogdanovich noted, "To follow Dwan's career is to watch

the evolution of an art." It is certainly that but it is also to watch the evolution and history of the film industry in the United States. By necessity, histories of the film industry are full of generalities. In closely following Dwan's career, you can understand the history of the film industry as you never have before. That is because it is full of particulars and the drive of one man to find his way through the thickets of emerging and failing companies to the entities that offered the best opportunities for him to work and to develop as a filmmaker. In the silent era, Dwan looked for the most forward-looking corporations. But late in his career, he made his way through the backwaters of the industry to seize available opportunities to preserve his independence.

He learned that he could not remain at any firm too long and became always prepared to move on.

This book covers a great many factors that were involved in the dynamics of Dwan's career and the quality of his work. These included the tumultuous changes in the film industry in its early years, Dwan's alliance with some major stars and his collaborators behind the camera. There are also glimpses of his personal life in the midst of his workaholic dedication to his craft. Not all the chapters in this book move in the same direction but they are all intended to give a broad context and understanding of what propelled the man and his career.

There is also a shift in the second half of the book. The director of the second half is much less of a public man and tends to disappear into his films. Consequently, there is a greater emphasis on discussing his movies in the second part. A number of these lesser-known films indeed merit more attention.

I also make no pretenses of this book having the final word on Allan Dwan. I might have gone on for additional years finding other bits and pieces, while some information may already be lost forever. And after seven years' work, I have already obtained more material than I could comfortably squeeze into one volume. Bogdanovich's book was a great leap forward in uncovering Dwan's neglected career. (That Dwan was so overlooked probably confirmed the director's own suspicions about the nature and brevity of fame.) I hope that this book will be seen as another great leap that answers some vital questions, corrects some inaccuracies and provides a much fuller account of Dwan's marvelously prolific career than was heretofore available. But there may be a bit more; "missing" films that may yet be found and individuals, whom I was not able to locate, who will step forward. I hope my book will encourage such developments and further consideration of Allan Dwan's status in film history.

As always, historians of all kinds must continue to build on each other's work.