

The Barbarian and the Geisha | Violent Saturday

THE BARBARIAN AND THE GEISHA

Although John Wayne had done several of his very early films at Fox (including *The Big Trail*), after he truly hit stardom in *Stagecoach* in 1939, it would be quite awhile until he returned there, this time as one of the leading box-office stars in the world. The film that brought him back was *The Barbarian and the Geisha*. Based on a story by Ellis St. John, 1958's *The Barbarian and the Geisha* recounts the story of Townsend Harris (John Wayne), who arrives in Japan in the 1850s as the first American to serve as Consul-General to Japan, and who was a key figure in opening relations between Japan and America. Whether the geisha aspect of the story is fiction or fact, it is part of Japanese folklore – in the film, Harris meets a young geisha (Eiko Ando), who comes to live in his house and who falls in love with him. The film, directed by John Huston, is a beauty to look at (thanks to the gorgeous photography of Charles G. Clarke), and the drama of both unrequited love and Harris trying to bring two mighty nations together makes for a compelling film.

Unfortunately, it wasn't compelling to critics and audiences of the time, but, over the years, it's aged well and can now be seen for what it really is – a good yarn, with excellent performances, and understated direction from John Huston. Apparently, the making of the film had some turmoil, with clashes between star and director, with neither really satisfied with the result. But whatever drama was happening on the set or in post-production, the film on view doesn't suffer for it, as some films with backstage drama surely do.

One of *The Barbarian and the Geisha's* strongest elements is its absolutely stunning score by Hugo Friedhofer. By that point, Friedhofer had already written several masterpieces, including *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Bishop's Wife*, and, at Fox, such glorious scores as *An Affair to Remember*, *The Boy on a Dolphin*, *The Rains of Ranchipur*, *Sol-*

dier of Fortune, *Seven Cities of Gold*, *The Revolt of Mamie Stover*, *Between Heaven and Hell*, and, the same year as *Barbarian*, *The Young Lions*.

Friedhofer's score manages to have Oriental color while remaining tonal in a completely American way. As Friedhofer recounted, "The story, if you analyze it very closely, is *Madama Butterfly* all over again. So my personal feeling is that it should be about as Japanese as Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. It should be a romantic, dramatic score, with certain ethnic overtones, but fundamentally something that wouldn't be puzzling to a European or American audience." What Friedhofer delivered was a thing of beauty and one of his best scores. His main theme is heartbreakingly beautiful and is repeated many times throughout the score, and the rest of his music complements and enriches every scene in the film – this is Golden Age movie music the way we remember Golden Age movie music – melodic, dramatic, tender, suspenseful, and evoking a different time and place through orchestral color and knowing how the orchestra can be utilized to also evoke Oriental textures without resorting to triteness.

VIOLENT SATURDAY

Three years earlier, Fox released Richard Fleischer's taut and suspenseful film, *Violent Saturday*, based on the novel by W. L. Heath. The plot concerns a bank robbery in a small copper mining town, masterminded by three crooks (played by Stephen McNally, J. Carrol Naish, and Lee Marvin). The small town has the usual array of behind-doors things going on: A mine manager (Victor Mature) trying to cope with an unruly son; his drunk of a boss (Richard Egan) dealing with an unfaithful wife (Margaret Hayes) and contemplating an affair with a nurse (Virginia Leith); a larcenous librarian (Sylvia Sydney), and a bank manager (Tommy Noonan) who is a peeping tom. And there is an Amish farmer and his family. All will be affected in one way or another by the robbery.

The film, made for under a million dollars, received some excellent reviews and did reasonably well at the box-office. Almost fifty years later, it's considered a classic (the DVD was recently released by Twilight Time and is a must-have), with its terrific performances, excellent writing (screenplay by Sidney Boehm, who wrote the screenplay for the noir classic, *The Big Heat*), and great direction from Fleischer, who really embraced Cinemascope and color (his first film in Cinemascope had been made the year before – the Disney classic, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*), and would go on to direct quite a few other Fox films, including *The Girl on the Red Velvet Swing*, *Between Heaven and Hell*, *Compulsion*, *Crack in the Mirror*, *Fantastic Voyage*, *Doctor Dolittle*, *The Boston Strangler*, and others.

The music for the film was by Hugo Friedhofer. It's a perfect score and a textbook example of how and when to use music. The last third of the film plays mostly without any score at all. All told, it's only about twenty minutes long, but it's the perfect amount of music for this film. It does exactly what film music is supposed to do – propels the film, underscores the scenes that need it, and stays out of the way when music would serve no purpose. There are no classic Friedhofer themes to be found – just music that functions sometimes as subtext, sometimes as suspense, and sometimes as violent as the goings on in *Violent Saturday*.

Both *The Barbarian and the Geisha* and *Violent Saturday* had previous CD releases on Intrada, both long out of print and instant sellouts. *The Barbarian and the Geisha* was a standalone CD and *Violent Saturday* played second feature to *Warlock* by Leigh Harline. It's great to be able to couple the two Friedhofer scores together, and make them available to those who may have missed out on the prior releases, or who'd like to have these two scores together on one CD. This release has been remastered by James Nelson.

— Bruce Kimmel