

George Stevens: A Cardinal of Cinema

At first glance, George Stevens appears to be the quintessential Hollywood director. But a closer look at his achievements shows him to be more than just the creator of some of the smartest dramas and most graceful comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, and several of the most important and enduring dramas of post-war American cinema. As a leading producer/director of his era, Stevens repeatedly pushed against the Hollywood grain, and nearly twenty-five years after his death, his achievements remain largely unexplored.

A man of the West – he was born in Oakland, California – Stevens started work in his parents' West Coast touring stock theater company as a child actor and stage manager. When it became clear that cinema was replacing live theater as the American public's entertainment of choice, Landers and Georgie Cooper Stevens moved south to Los Angeles with their two sons, Jack and George. Stevens' formal education ended soon thereafter (though certainly intelligent and well-read, his spelling was never good), in part because he spent much of his time driving his actor father to auditions at nearby Hollywood studios. It was here where Stevens, at the age of only seventeen, became an assistant cameraman, cutting his teeth on a series of Westerns produced by Hal Roach, filmed in the wilds of Utah and Nevada. As James Silke wrote in 1964, "The city boy went outdoors and learned to ride, rope and climb mountains. The young Stevens thrived on the new life and experiences that opened up for him to explore."

Within three years Stevens, who trained under cinematographer Floyd Jackman, had started work on the first of dozens of Laurel and Hardy shorts as a cameraman and gagman (he also shot many of the *Our Gang* and Harry Langdon comedies). After having solved the problem of Stan Laurel's blue eyes which did not adequately register on orthochromatic film stock (Stevens suggested panchromatic film be used instead), Roach decided to give the enterprising young man his first opportunity to direct. The result was the 1930 short *Ladies Last*. When differences in comedic style forced the two men apart, Stevens moved first to Universal and then, in 1933, to RKO where he directed a series of highly regarded light-hearted feature entertainments. Jumping from genre to genre, his films of this era include *Alice Adams*, featuring an important early role for Katherine Hepburn (who described Stevens as "a really brilliant director"), *Swing Time*, perhaps the most highly regarded Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals, and the classic action adventure yarn *Gunga Din*, the influence of which can be seen on more than one recent Hollywood blockbuster.

By 1943 Stevens also had *Woman of the Year*, the first Hepburn and Spencer Tracy pairing – one that set the style and tone of the eight further films they made together – and the Cary Grant comedy *The Talk of the Town*, under his belt. He had become, in the space of only ten years, one of America's most important and admired directors, having produced a stylish and diverse body of work that would

foreshadow his post-war achievements. Then, at the age of nearly forty (well over draft age), Stevens left Hollywood for Europe, where as a Signal Corps Lt. Colonel he traveled with Allied forces from D-Day through to the battle for Berlin as the commander of a group of writers and cameramen who became known as the Stevens Irregulars. His team included William Saroyan, Irwin Shaw, Ivan Moffat, who worked on the script for *Giant*, and William Mellor, who would win Oscars shooting *A Place in the Sun* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Stevens personally shot important color sequences using his own 16mm camera at the liberation of Paris, the meeting of Russian and American troops at the Elbe in April 1945, and the entry of American troops into Dachau concentration camp in southern Germany. As he made clear in interviews over the years, these wartime experiences had a profound effect on him: "Films were much less important to me, and in a way, perhaps more important."

Stevens' films underwent something of a sea change on his return from Europe. Between 1954 and 1956 he produced his 'American Trilogy,' three films with darker themes than his pre-war work. *A Place in the Sun* (which, writes Donald Richie, expresses the "attitude of the mature artist"), *Shane* (a film that Edward Countryman and Evonne von Heussen-Countryman note "considers violence where there is no law, both in terms of what a shooting does and as a historical problem in America's development"), and *Giant* (the epic that, as critic Richard Schickel has noted, caused many to think differently about America's racial problems) solidified Stevens' international reputation as a director of quality American drama. His final films, which include *The Diary of Anne Frank*, certainly influenced by his experiences at Dachau, and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, a re-telling of the life of Jesus, were a fitting end to a career during which he earned two Academy Awards for Best Director, and scores of other honors.

His training at the hands of figures like Jackman and Laurel (the creative force behind the comic duo) meant that by the time Stevens was given the opportunity to direct himself, he had a wealth of experience to draw from. Edgardo Cozarinsky has written that Stevens "can be seen 'doing something' with every scene of his major films." Yet nearly thirty years after his death, Stevens – one of the very few Hollywood cameramen who moved successfully into directing – remains a relatively ignored figure in American film history, and though many cinemagoers know his work, most would be hard pushed to name the director of *Shane* or *Giant*. One reason for this is perhaps due to a certain snobbishness on the part of film scholars. Unlike figures such as Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock and Nicholas Ray, Stevens was never heralded as an auteur and paraded across the pages of French film magazines in the 1950s and 60s. But in several crucial respects, Stevens – a director who rarely accepted studio assignments, preferring instead to initiate projects himself – can certainly be considered as the 'author' of his films.

A look at his body of work reveals Stevens' film-making strategy over his forty year career: quality over quantity. Like many of his Hollywood contemporaries his pre-war output was prolific, but from the late Forties onwards Stevens chose instead to spend lengthy periods of pre-production working with writers on the screenplays of his films, a process that can be documented as early as *Alice Adams* in 1935. As Stevens explained, "For me it's absolutely necessary to start from the very beginning. I can't think of coming and contributing something anywhere along the line other than the very start... The 'auteur' concept is certainly the most desirable form of film-making, from my point of view." Antonio Vellani, associate producer of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, was present at numerous script conferences over a period of several years. For Vellani, Stevens "was primarily a writer, with an extraordinary control of the craft of screenwriting." In fact, as Stevens' 1973 seminar at the American Film Institute makes clear, he was scripting *Gunga Din* at the same time as shooting, thus injecting a vibrant improvisatory nature to his work. This was, perhaps, a practice carried over from his years with Laurel and Hardy, though as Edward Countryman and Evonne von Heussen-Countryman make clear, it was "more the product of knowing where he wanted to take the film before he started shooting than of simply making it up as he went along."

Stevens also did extensive historical research for many of his films. "I've always been of the opinion that a director should never touch a film without having a basic knowledge of its contents," he said. As such, Stevens worked with a former member of the Dutch resistance during pre-production, and spent considerable time with Otto Frank, father of Anne, in the Amsterdam attic where the Frank family hid from the Nazis, all to ensure that *The Diary of Anne Frank* was as true to reality as possible. When discussing *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Stevens told an interviewer, "There is enormous responsibility involved in the subject matter. I wouldn't have felt comfortable in going into the production of the film without the kind of study we did. Not only historic study, but more importantly Gospel studies. We had to approach our research with humility, reverence and a good deal of energy." As a consequence, Stevens spent three years researching his story before shooting a single foot of film, a process that included lengthy visits to Israel and Jordan in 1960. He even hired an old-time cowhand as technical advisor for *Shane* who gave notes about everything from the costumes and eating habits of the characters, to the way they spoke. "I believe that if you make a film properly today, it'll be watched by people in fifty years time," Stevens said. "These pictures are around for a long while," he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1955. "We want them to be good."

More evidence for Stevens' authorial status comes from the fact that he was determined to retain absolute control of his work, and be able to affect every element of a film's production. Much to the chagrin of the studios, his shooting technique – the result of what has been called his 'laborious perfectionism' – was to cover scenes from many angles. As such, Stevens' cutting rooms were full of many times the usual amount of film, giving him the widest range of options in

shaping the story and controlling the performances. Stevens' friend, director Joseph Mankiewicz, explains that "after the actors were gone, the technicians were gone, there was nothing left but George and his film. It always seemed to me that the editing room was where George made his films. I don't know any other director that worked quite that way. And that's why the making of films, I thought, for George was a very private, personal thing."

At one point during production on *Shane* he was requested by the Production Code Administration to tone down the killing of Torrey (Elisha Cook Jr.). Stevens gave his audience no quarter by rigging Cook Jr. up to a block and pulley system, which meant that when hit by the bullet from Jack Wilson's gun, his body flew backwards into the mud. "You know, the one thing I wanted to do with *Shane*," he said, "was to show if you point a .45 at a man and pull the trigger, you destroy an upright figure." Needless to say, Stevens – a man who cared passionately about the emotive and moral power of the stories he was telling – ensured that the scene passed the censors' eyes without alteration.

Moreover, Stevens was one of the first major producer/directors in Hollywood. His contract with Liberty Films, the company he established in 1945 with fellow directors William Wyler and Frank Capra (who described it as a "wonderful independent set-up that all the directors in the world were watching and hoping to emulate"), gave him 'full autonomy' in his film-making, including 'the right to edit, cut and score' his work as he saw fit. Liberty soon ran short of financing and the company was sold to Paramount over Stevens' objections after producing only one film, Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. The three directors were, in certain respects, very much ahead of their time. Though the company prefigured the independent movement in American cinema that exploded in the late 1960s, as Gene D. Phillips notes, in the 1940s "it was still a bit too early for Hollywood to accept fully the concept of independent production companies, since the studio system would remain in its heyday until the early 1950s."

Stevens' determination to protect his work led him to sue Paramount and NBC in 1965 when the television network planned to screen *A Place in the Sun* in what he saw as "a distorted, truncated and segmented version." Stevens argued that NBC had replaced the film's dissolves with fades and had inserted commercials "at the expense of the artistic integrity, the mood, effect and continuity of the film... It's like taking the cadenza out of a concerto." His court case became something of a *cause célèbre*, and as the *New York Times* noted in May 1966, led a group of influential Hollywood directors "to launch a vigorous counterattack in their campaign to reduce or eliminate commercial interruptions from motion pictures shown on television."

"I have brought this action," explained Stevens (as quoted in *Variety*), "not only because of its significance as applied to the specific picture involved, but also because I think the issue is vital to all film-makers and one of key importance to the general public. I believe that, with respect to a film which has been accorded

the attention and acclaim of a vast audience, the film itself is entitled to receive, and the public to enjoy, the same integrity in its presentation which led to its original acceptance.” “A motion picture should be respected as being more than a tool for selling soap, toothpaste, deodorant, used cars, beer and the whole gamut of products advertised on television,” he told an interviewer in 1963. “The audience too should be respected by being presented with a film as they remember it, and for those who have not seen it, as it was intended to be seen. Anything less is a degradation of the film and its audience.”

Stevens commanded great respect from his fellow film-makers, who elected him twice as President of the Screen Directors Guild. It speaks volumes that in the midst of problems during the filming of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Jean Negulesco and David Lean (fresh from his international success *Lawrence of Arabia*) volunteered to assist by directing (un-credited) other camera units. Earlier, in 1950, as McCarthyism and blacklisting swept through Hollywood, Cecil B. DeMille decided he wanted all members of the Guild to sign a compulsory loyalty oath. When Joseph Mankiewicz, the Guild’s President, opposed such a move, DeMille sought to have him removed. On hearing of this battle, and wanting to distance himself as far as possible from DeMille, Stevens engaged a lawyer to investigate the situation, and then resigned from the Guild’s governing board. This move helped block what John Huston has described as a ‘putsch,’ and DeMille backed down. The story goes that during their confrontation, implying he was doing nothing to stop the spread of communism in Hollywood, DeMille demanded to know where Stevens had been during the war. Explained Stevens: “I was up to my ass in mud at Bastogne, C.B., while you were fighting the battle of capital gains.” Fred Zinnemann has said that “To the young members of the Directors Guild who were idealists and who wanted to make good films, George was a sort of Pope, or certainly a Cardinal. He was one of the few people who could stand up to the front office. We all learned that we could have some measure of success if we didn’t give up. Nobody at the studios took film seriously as a creative medium. George was one of the people who instilled in the studios that film was more than that.”

Though much of his filmography reads as a list of solid financial successes, Stevens was forever hoping to affect audience emotions rather than studio coffers. All of his films are emotionally honest, a reflection of Stevens’ own way of looking at the world. In George Stevens Jr.’s film about his father, Stevens recalls walking through the gates of Dachau. “When a poor man, hungry and unseeing because his eyesight is failing, grabs me and starts begging, I feel the Nazi in myself. I abhor this man, and I want him to keep his hands off me. And the reason I want him to keep his hands off me is because I see myself capable of arrogance and brutality to keep him off me. That’s a fierce thing, to discover within yourself that which you despise the most in others.” And in terms of the industry he so loved, regardless of his box-office security at the studios for most of his working life, Stevens sought real change. The *Los Angeles Daily News* reported in 1948 that “Stevens would like to see the motion picture industry set

up a fund for the production of non-commercial films, which could be turned out one a year by different studios, and exhibited in small houses... It would offer an outlet for Hollywood's own craftsmen who deplore the emphasis on commercialisation, and obviously it would please select audiences." (It was, in fact, George Stevens Jr. who founded such an organization in 1967: the American Film Institute.)

Today, Stevens' body of work seems more coherent and impressive when taken as a whole than if the films are looked at individually. Put together, the thirty-four features allow audiences to become better aware of the themes that so pre-occupied the director throughout his career. Critic Gilbert Adair has written that at his most personal, "Stevens might be described as a chronicler of the pursuit of happiness, that craving for self-betterment," while for Donald Richie, the key notion of Stevens' work – as seen in characters as diverse as Alice Adams, Anne Frank, Shane, Jesus, George Eastman in *A Place in the Sun* and Jett Rink in *Giant* – is that of "how the outsider reacts to his situation." Whichever assessment is more accurate, one thing is certain: something of an outsider himself, Stevens always had great respect for his audiences, who in turn responded positively to the profound humanism in his work.

Paul Cronin

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