

'It made him an A-lister': John Ford's breakthrough film The Iron Horse at 100

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Match these films with the years they were released.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------|
| 1. Frozen | a. 2000 |
| 2. Star Wars (Episode IV) | b. 1997 |
| 3. Avatar | c. 2023 |
| 4. Titanic | d. 2009 |
| 5. Barbie | e. 2013 |
| 6. Gladiator | f. 1977 |

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

A-lister

epic

genre

harsh

location

1. A(n) _____ film or book is famous and exciting.
2. A(n) _____ is a type of film, e.g. a horror film, a love story or a western.
3. _____ weather is extremely cold and unpleasant.
4. If a director makes a film on _____, he or she makes it away from a studio.
5. A(n) _____ is a very famous, very successful and very rich person.

adore

ambush

pass

transcontinental

vicious

6. A(n) _____ railway, road or flight goes from one side of a continent to the other.
7. A(n) _____ is a high path between two mountains.
8. If people _____ someone, they hide and wait and then attack them.
9. A(n) _____ murder is very violent.
10. If you _____ something, you love it very much.

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b. Use some of the key words from task A and complete the examples. You may have to change the form of the word.

1. The dog was _____ and barked loudly to protect his home.
2. That movie star is an _____; everyone wants to make movies with her.
3. The teacher was _____ when she told us we had to re-do our homework.
4. The _____ train travels across many countries in a few days.
5. The soldiers plan to _____ the enemy when they cross the river.

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- 1 Director John Ford's epic western The Iron Horse is a black-and-white silent movie. It is almost forgotten now but many people think it is the greatest movie of all time.
- 2 Ford won more Oscars than any other director, with four awards for feature films and two for war documentaries. None of these films were westerns, a genre Ford loved.
- 3 The Iron Horse is two and a half hours of history, drama and beauty. "They mostly filmed it in Nevada," says Ford biographer Joseph McBride. "It was freezing cold, and conditions were harsh. But Ford liked to be on location away from the studios."
- 4 The Iron Horse's made a lot of money and Ford became famous within the film industry. "I always say The Iron Horse was for Ford like Jaws was for Steven Spielberg," says McBride. "It gave him a lot of influence, and finally, at the age of 30, he was an A-lister."
- 5 The Iron Horse follows the construction of the US's first transcontinental railroad – the Union Pacific (west from Omaha, Nebraska) and Central Pacific (initially east from Sacramento, California). Ford's film shows the railway's difficult progress in a dry, documentary style. But the script is also dramatic: good guys, bad guys, and a hero and heroine who are also lovers.
- 6 George O'Brien stars as Davy Brandon. The young Brandon and his father explore the Sierras to find a pass for the railroad. A band of Cheyenne ambush them, and Brandon witnesses his father's vicious murder by Deroux, a white man dressed as a Cheyenne. Years later, Brandon offers to search for the pass from his childhood memories and finds his childhood sweetheart, Miriam.
- 7 Ford does not portray Native Americans as the bad guys. He shows Deroux encouraging the Cheyenne to attack. But there's one character Ford adored: the old West, a vast landscape. "It takes a particular eye to present a western,"

says movie critic Jose Cuenca. "Ford was able to film that beauty. He combines great landscapes with great characters."

- 8 In August 1973, John Ford died. He was 79 years old and made about 140 films in a 55-year directorial career. As Orson Welles said, "I prefer the old masters – by which I mean John Ford, John Ford and John Ford."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. How many "Best Director" Oscars did John Ford win?
2. How many of these films were westerns?
3. How long does *The Iron Horse* film last?
4. Where did they film it?
5. How old was Ford when he became an A-lister?
6. Why were Brandon and his father exploring the Sierras?
7. Who murdered Brandon's father?
8. Which 'character' did Ford adore?
9. When did Ford die?
10. How many films did he make during his career?

4 Key language

a. Read the sentences from the article. Circle the correct verb tense.

at

for

of

on

with

1. combine _____
2. _____ location
3. _____ the age of
4. a lot _____ influence
5. an award _____ his films

b. Use the expressions from Task A to fill the gaps in the sentences.

1. They filmed *The Iron Horse* _____ in Nevada.
2. Ford became an A-lister _____ 30.
3. The film gave him _____ in Hollywood.
4. Many times, Ford received _____ his work.
5. Many directors _____ one genre _____ another to make more interesting films.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What is your favorite movie genre? Why?
- What is a movie genre you don't like? Why?

6 In your own words

a. Use an internet search engine to find more information about a famous film director or actor.

Find the following information:

- What was their first film called? When did they make it?
- When did they get their first successful film?
- How many films have they made?
- Have they received any awards for their films? When did he make his first film?

b. Add any other information you find interesting and report your findings to the class..