American Films of the Great Outdoors

ME AND MY DOG
ALASKAN ADVENTURE

W. S. VAN DYKE'S

WHITE SHADOWS IN THE SOUTH SEAS

"ME AND MY DOG" (c. 1928, produced by Robert Bruce)

This delightful one-reeler is one of scores that Robert Bruce made in the twenties for release through Paramount, Fox and sundry other companies. While the names of Barton Holmes and James Fitzpatrick have been remembered, the name of Bruce has somehow fallen by the wayside. This is a pity, for there is more feeling for, and love of, the outdoors in Bruce's films than in those of any of his contemporaries. "Me and My Dog" is as simple as its title - Bruce and a canine friend (plus an unobtrusive cameraman) wandering through the Rockies. The camerawork is a joy to behold, and some of the compositions could not have been bettered by Tisse.

"ALASKAN ADVENTURES"


Something of a forerunner to Disney's True-Life adventure series, "Alaskan Adventure" is a somewhat shapeless but nonetheless fascinating account of an expedition into Alaska by hunters armed only with bows and arrows. While the reason for the expedition remains somewhat obscure, the footage that emerges is first-class - taking in pleasing studies of wild-life, and thrilling footage of the party crossing the frozen but thawing Yukon river, and the subsequent breaking up of the ice. Incidentally, much of the footage that appears in this film has been on the stock shot market for many years now, some scenes turning up in such unlikely places as "The Return of the Ape Man", a cheap Lugosi horror thriller.

"WHITE SHADOWS IN THE SOUTH SEAS"

MG M 1928 - nine reels. (2 hrs, 10 mins approx)

Directed by W.S. Van Dyke. Based on the book by Frederick O'Brien; produced and photographed on location with the native tribes of the Marquesas Islands in the South Seas; adaptation by Ray Doyle; continuity - Jack Cunningham; Photography by Clyde de Vinna, George Nogle and Bob Roberts; Titles by John Colton; Props - Harry Albies; Grips - Pop Arnold; original musical score (not on this print) by Major Edward Bowers, David Mendoza and William Arty. Theme song "Flower of Love" published by Irving Berlin Inc. Starring: MONTÉ BLOX (Dr. Mathew Lloyd); RAQUEL TORMES (Fayaway); Robert Anderson (Sebastian); Zebo Bush (Lucy, a native girl).
A program note by Charles Shibuk:

Late in 1927, Irving Thalberg, production chief at MGM, decided to make a large-scale adventure film in the South Seas which would combine documentary backgrounds with a fictional story. Frederick O'Brien's South Seas tale of adventure was chosen as the most likely vehicle. Thalberg offered the director's job to Robert Flaherty whose work with the Polynesian natives on "Moana" qualified him as an expert on South Seas film-making. Flaherty accepted the assignment on this studio-backed story film only because of his inability to find work elsewhere. One mitigating factor was Flaherty's friendship for author O'Brien, in whose work he had long expressed filmic interest.

However, leery of sending an individualistic director like Flaherty (whose 1926 "Moana" was not a spectacular boxoffice success) alone to the South Seas, Thalberg appointed Woodbridge Strong, Van Dyke's assistant director, Van Dyke's previous experience was mainly on serials and westerns in which he had directed such stars as Ruth Roland, Jack Dempsey and Buck Jones; and he had also been instrumental in launching Tom Hefoys' spectacular career. At this particular time, both the western film and Van Dyke were in decline.

Thus, on November 30, 1927, the two directors, the actors, Monte Blue, Raquel Torres (her first American film) and Robert Anderson (from the Danish cinema) and a crew of fourteen set out for the island of Fakaoate to start production. After a short period of preliminary work, Flaherty unfortunately found that working under the studio system with an unsympathetic crew who would rather leave than work, was an impossibility, and he found himself forced to resign. (Stories and rumors that Flaherty was fired are quite untrue and without foundation.) W.S. Van Dyke, doing second unit work at this time, was hastily placed in charge of the production by the front office. This gave him the chance to make a really big film on his own.

Production on the film was completed in four months, and the budget only slightly exceeded half-a-million dollars. Van Dyke rightfully received sole directorial credit, and with the exception of some dozen shots by Flaherty, the film was completed his. It is of course interesting to speculate on what Flaherty would have done had he been able to complete the film. Paul Rotha has no doubt that it would have surpassed his work on "Moana".

Back in Hollywood, sound was revolutionizing the picture business. Louis B. Mayer, studio chief at MGM, decided to turn Van Dyke's production into the studio's first sound film. Music, native chants, sound effects (remember the scene where the white hero teaches the Polynesian girl to whistle?), and a sequence in which Van Dyke verbalized the credits, were dubbed in at the studio. A huge publicity campaign soon followed.

The world premiere of the film was held at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Flying in from New York came D.W. Griffith to pay his respects to Van Dyke who had served under him as an assistant director on "Intolerance" twelve years earlier. At the end of the screening, Griffith introduced Van Dyke to the audience by saying: "WHITE SHADOWS IN THE SOUTH SEAS is a work of art, and Woody Van Dyke is the artist who brought it into being."

The film was the turning point in Van Dyke's career as a director, acclaimed as an artistic as well as a popular success. Although the film was "less pure than "Moana" (Bardeche and Brasillach) it had the same virtues as Flaherty's film, fine acting by natives (as well as stars) combined with Clyde De Vinne's breathtaking natural photography prompted Paul Rotha to admit, grudgingly: "White Shadows ... will remain memorable for its liquid sunlight, its gently swaying palms, its white-clouded skies, its far-reaching stretches of hot sand and beach ... it ranks with "The General Line" and "Moana" as being a perfect example of the beautiful decorative values of panchromatic photography."

Van Dyke's reputation as an explorer-director was made; a series of films in exotic lands followed quickly: TRADER HORN in Africa, THE PAGAN in Tahiti; and DEERHOOD in Alaska. Van Dyke also turned out such solid boxoffice attractions as TARZAN THE APE MAN, THE THIN MAN (and several sequels), NAUGHT MARIETTA, SAN FRANCISCO and MARIE ANTOINETTE for MGM. He died in harness in February, 1943, just after the completion of JOURNEY FOR MARGARET in which MGM introduced child star Margaret O'Brien to her adoring public.

Charles Shibuk.

A few concluding notes to Mr. Shibuk's concise summary. First, our print is the complete nine-reel version, and every frame is there. This is the first NT showing in many years, and a rare item indeed. Although made as late as 1927-28, the film still employed very much of a silent speed in its camerawork. Most films made in that period can safely be run off at the standard sound 24 frames per second. At that speed, "White Shadows" hops about like "Intolerance" at the same speed. We will of course be showing it at the admittedly arbitrary but vastly preferable 16 frames per second.
It is strange that Floherty should have been so generally disinterested in the production, as it is far from a "Hollywood" film. If it is romanticised, it is romanticised in the tradition of "Turbo" rather than "A Room with a View". The only notable Hollywood touch (other than some tec nical trickery in a storm sequence) is the inevitable episode of the hero accidentally coming across some island natives disposing themselves nude in a pool. The "thrill" of the climax episode, when a diver is mauled by both octopus and shark, may be a trifle contrived but no more so than the shark-hunting in "Man of Aran", or the tussle with the alligator in Floherty’s Louisiana film. Rotha’s grudging praise of the film as it emerged, and his implied suggestion that Floherty, if left alone, could have made a masterpiece from it, is typical of the intellectual snobbery directed at the Hollywood film. More to the point would have been to have pondered the question of how much better "Man of Aran" might have been if Van Dyke had directed it.

Incidentally, Van Dyke’s use of guaze before the camera not only produces some strikingly beautiful shots, but in the climaxes particularly, is probably more genuinely creative than this device has ever been before or since. One of Van Dyke’s assistants on the film, by the way, was Leslie Selander. Selander has also worked with Van Dyke on his excellent series of silent Tim McCoy westerns (one of the finest series of "lesser" westerns ever made) and from 1936 on was himself a top-flying director of westerns, both "A" and "B". Van Dyke made some 80 pictures all told, of which "White Shadows" is undoubtedly one of the most famous. Star Monte Blue is still spasmodically active, mainly in bit roles.

While in itself condemning the white man’s spoiling of the island paradises, "White Shadows" and its production unit seems to have followed the same pattern: Floherty told bitter stories of the crew rolling around in the sun, listening to radio broadcasts from the Coconut Grove. And the unusually elaborate camerawork indicates that the islands must have been a mad maze of pot-holes and discarded camera-tracks when the unit finally sailed home.

**EXTRA PROGRAM**

An additional program has been scheduled for exactly one week after "White Shadows" - on Tuesday, March 27th, at the same time, same place. There will be no further notification through the mail, so please make a note of the screening. Full program notes will be distributed at the meeting itself.

Two off-beat musical films on New York life in the prohibition and depression years, covering the late silent and early sound era.

"SING A SONG" The silent version of Paul Fejos' fabulous hit of 1929. Famous for its extravagant night-club set, and the enormous camera crane that was devised to photograph it. An enormous production in every sense of the word, and one that is rarely shown. Starring Glenn Tryon, Evelyn Brent, Nora Kennedy, Thomas Jackson, Leslie Fenton and Paul Porcasi.

"Hallelujah I'M A BUM" Lewis Milestone’s lovely, under-rated, musical romance of the depression. A minor masterpiece written by Ben Hecht, with songs and musical dialogue by Rodgers and Hart. Starring Al Jolson, Judge Evans, Harry Langdon, Frank Morgan and Chester Conklin. Our print is the shortened reissue version, but it’s still a thoroughly enchanting movie.

**FORCOMING SHOWS**

April 17: "HERE GO BOUND" with Norman Kerry and Mary Philbin; the extravagant opus directed by Von Stroheim and Rupert Julian. And: NY premiere of two new experimental films.

May: The Career of Henry B. Walthall, A compilation of films following the star from 1909 through to 1936. Many fine extracts, plus the complete GHOSTS and the outstanding Griffith-Diagoraph short "THE HOUSE OF THE GLADSия SHADOWS".

June: Frank Capra’s "THAT CERTAIN THING" (1928) and shorts to be announced.

July and August - to be announced.

September - Two early features - Henry B. Walthall in D.W. Griffith’s JULIET OF RETULIA and Alan Hale in "FAST LYNNE" October - "RPM" with the Gish Sisters, Ronald Colman, William Powell.

Additional programs to be screened shortly:


**prog, notes & inquiries:** Bill Erverson, Manhattan Towers, 2166 Broadway, NYC 24