THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Extra Program: Tuesday March 27th, 1956. In the Marine Room, Capitol Hotel, 7.30 p.m.

HOLLYWOOD ON NEW YORK Two off-beat musical films on the Hollywood scene, covering the end of the silent and the early talkie eras, and spanning the fading jazz age, the gangster and prohibition eras, and the depression years.

"BROADWAY" Presented by Carl Laemmle, directed by Paul Fejos, for Universal, 1929
Based on the Jed Harris stage play by Phillip Dunning and George Abbott; adaptation by Edward T. Logan Jr.; Associate producer, Carl Laemmle Jr.; Score by Howard Jackson; Asst. Scenarioist: Charles Fursman; Editors: Robert Carlisle, Eddie Cahn; Supervising Editor: Maurice Pivar.
With: Glenn Tryon (Roy Lane); Evelyn Brent (Pearl); Norna Kennedy (Billie Moore); Thomas E. Jackson (Dan McComb); Robert Ellis (Stereo Crandall); Paul Porcasi (Nick Verdis); Otis Harlan (Party Thompson); Leslie Fenton (Sear Edwards); Fritz Feld (Moe Lavetti); George Overy (Maloney); Betty Francis (Minnie); Edith Flynn (Ruby); Florence Dudley (Ann); Ruby McCoy (Grace); Lil the hostess (Marias Lord); Arthur Husman (Dolph); George Davis (Walter); and Gus Arsheim's orchestra.

The end of the silent era was Hollywood's richest, lustiest, erasiest period -- and at no studio was the aura of extravagant insallity more apparent than at Universal, where Uncle Carl Laemmle was wont to import European talent, to be welcomed by wholesale stoppage of work all over the lot, and accompanied by the noisiest Germanic brass bands. "Broadway" was a product of this wonderful, awful period -- an enormous, sprawling picture, filled with huge Technicolor production numbers, and featuring a surrealistic nightmare of a night-club set which was approximately the size of Grand Central Station. The boys at Universal neither knew nor cared that New York had not one night-club a tenth its size - all that mattered in '29 was that it be the biggest in Hollywood. Nor did the extravagance end with this film: when "The King of Jazz" came along, John Murray Anderson was rushed to Hollywood to direct. For weeks he had scores of workmen digging massive holes in the "Broadway" stage, until finally four gigantic revolving stages were unveiled for the admiration of Uncle Carl. And Mr. Laemmle did admire these fantastically costly stages, until he innocently inquired why they were to revolve. To which Mr. Anderson replied that it was so the audiences could see all of the orchestras placed thereon; apparently he wasn't aware that the cameras could move around the stages, and so had the stages move around the cameras. That was just the beginning of probably the greatest single fiasco in motion picture history -- and if we have digressed a little, it is just to sketch in the atmosphere prevailing at Universal when "Broadway" was made.

As an adaptation of a play, "Broadway" has many of the faults of the genre. Most of the physical action takes place off-stage (i.e., gangster activities in the streets) and is merely talked about. But if it is somewhat static in content, it is by no means static in treatment. This is the film for which director Fejos, and cameraman Mohr, devised the fantastic "Broadway" crane -- an enormous contraption that more resembled an ancient scaling-tower than a piece of photographic equipment. But the results achieved by it -- even if the moving camera does run riot at times -- are truly staggering, and often creative. Some of the sweeping shots, covering the entire night-club in vast panoramic shots (yes, the word is applicable) are extremely impressive, and even in less spectacular scenes, the camerawork is always first-class. Incidentally, Universal's great crane continued to be used down through the years -- in "Nagana," "A Hundred Men and a Girl," and countless other films.

For its size and importance, "Broadway" seems, today, to have a strangely unimpressive cast. Other than Evelyn Brent, perfectly cast, the stars seem to be very much second-string -- but at the time, in Hollywood if not in the rest of the country, they were considered top-liners. Thomas Jackson and Paul Porcasi incidentally had created their roles in the stage version -- and were to remain in those roles, with few variations, through their entire careers.

It's refreshing to note the "lack of moral compensation" in the climax of these pre-Code days, when murder was often condemned as a plot solution -- provided it was perpetrated on an unsympathetic character by one who was definitely a good guy (or gal).

The length of the sound version was 2,330 feet; it came out first, with this somewhat shortened (7 reel) silent version later, most of the deletions of course being in the big musical numbers, although interesting extracts from these remain. "Film Daily" reviewed it as "Real boxoffice ... rich production value and unusual photographic effects ... the night-club covers acres - while never true, certainly impressive ... an intelligent film and a fine popular attraction." It opened on Broadway at the Globe, succeeding another Universal film "Show Boat," it was sold on a combination of sex and size. The ads were frankly erotic, and were accompanied by such catchlines as "Nothing but the biggest sets could be big enough for the biggest moments the stage has ever known -- a million-candle-power picture."
Universal's film was not alone in the gangster-come-musical field, and films like First National's "Broadway Babes", an Alice White vehicle directed by LeRoy, were playing in direct competition. This prompted Universal to insert the following line in their trade ads: "Use of the word Broadway in other film productions is unauthorised, and has no connection with this, the original play". It didn't stop the play on the title however - and in any event, the musical extravaganza style was now on with a vengeance, Alan Osolson's "On With the Show" being another that was competing with Mr. Lamelle's opus for top playing time.

"Broadway" was also one of the last important films of Merza Kennedy, Chaplin's leading lady in "The Circus". She soon dropped into "B" quickies and disappeared. The film was remade by Universal in the forties, but despite a good cast - George Raft, Pat O'Brien, Broderick Crawford etc. - it was a generally routine film. This, the original "Broadway", is very rarely shown these days, and we are happy to bring it back for a re-visit viewing in 1956.

"Hallelujah I'm A Bum" UA-1933
Presented by Joseph Schenck, directed by Louis Milestone.
Original story by Ben Hecht, adaptation by S.N. Behrman; musical dialogue and songs by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart; Art director - Richard Day; Camera - Lucien Andriot; Recording engineer - Oscar Lagerstrom; starring AL JOLSON with MADGE EVANS, FRANK MORGAN, HARRY LANGDON, CHESTER CONKLIN, Edgar Conner, Tyler Brooke, Bert Roach, Dorothy Wolpert, Harold Young, Tyler Brooke, Louise Carver.

Since Richard Kraft, a long-time admirer of this enchanting and sadly under-rated minor masterpiece, is our "guest" program annotator on this film, I will restrict myself to a few general comments on the print - and the items missing from it. Under the title "Heart of New York", our print was reissued to cash in on the Jolson vogue in the mid-forties, and like most reissues, was inexplicably cut. Twelve minutes were taken from the original running time of 62 minutes. Now this film, with its vague, leisurely continuity, is a very easy one to cut. The fact that, for the most part, the cuts are tough to spot, does at least ensure undisturbed continuity - unlike the sadly hacked "Lost Horizon". Not that we are applauding the cuts; but they were disturbing only to those who remember and cherish the full version. All of the charm of the film was taken away, and it was desiccated and deliberately and deliberately.

The complete song numbers have been deleted (these are dealt with more fully), one of which, the cornerstone episode, was particularly interesting in that it was edited in rhythm with the lyrics. Otherwise short scenes have been removed from the beginnings and ends of sequences; when the Mayor takes his girl friend to dinner, their opening conversation - awkward, hesitant - is cut, and we are taken right into the meat of their discussion; when Dumber's friends steal Langdon's papers, we lose the quick shot of those newspaper spread around the park; and so on. The song number where Dumber's friends gather when they learn he has found a then named dollar bill has been trimmed somewhat; and there is a rather glaring chop right at the end. While the image - Dumber reclining on a park bench - is fine for the fadeout, the sound track tells us all too clearly that a climactic chorus is coming up. And there is one brief censor cut - a brief, touching scene in the park where Madge Evans (in silhouette) approached Jolson in a state of nudity.

These omissions are very much to be regretted, but we can be thankful for the seventy exquisite minutes that remain of lovely Madge Evans, of lovable Harry Langdon, and of Frank Morgan - truly moving in a straight performance before he acquired so many MG Wannamiers. And even Jolson seems to be less aggressive and bombastic than usual; that ego pops through on occasion, but never has he done any better acting than he does in the touching drunk scene with Morgan where he realises that he has lost his "Angel". This is not a "typical" film for any of the talents involved (except, possibly, Miss Evans) - but it does have occasional typical touches. At least one Jolson song is in the old, hand-clasping style. And even in Central Park, Milestone manages to work in one fast lateral tracking shot.

"Hallelujah I'm A Bum" .... A Rhapsodic Evaluation by Richard Kraft

Shortly before Al Jolson passed away he was being interviewed; and the question was asked of him: "What was the best picture you ever appeared in?" .......... "I don't know what was the best picture," answered the Winter Garden troubadour, "but I know what was the worst - 'Hallelujah I'm A Bum'". Jolson's opinion is shared by many people to this day - and the film was not a success, when it was issued initially in 1933. Yet, to a minority, it is not only the best picture that the Broadway entertainer ever appeared in, but a treasured momento of the early thirties musical film ... and a salient talkie of rich merit to boot. In the main, dislike of it can be based on the fact that the film is off-beat; the very antithesis of what was eagerly expected in a Jolson musical (the precedent having been begun by "The Jazz Singer") - and the formula musicals in general - of the period. It lacked that vast sentimentality of prior Jolsons, and the story is more quixotic fable than the tightly plotted, pathetically opuses that audiences have become accustomed to from the former minstrel man. It is significant that there is not a single
"Hobey" is "Hallelujah I'm a Bum". Thus, it is not surprising that the picture was greeted with puzzled impatience by the meat-heads - but the critics and highbrows too, either sneered or were afoot - and the smile reception even spread across the water to that horrendous collection of super-ostentatious (and sterile) criticism, "Garbo and the Big Bandwagon" in England. But for every twenty who hated this little masterpiece, there was usually one, present company included, who fell in love with it. And like many another off-beat - "The Lost Patrol", the original "Law and Order", "Shooting Stars" and "A Man's Castle" to quote a few - the love fosters fealty, and the work is warmly praised to the end of the devotee's span.

"Unorthodox" the film may be: it is also remarkably cinematic. Hardly realistic in the ponderously methodical fashion of most films of 1933 and 1936, the dialogue sings and rhymes, the images and cutting are predicted to the joy, sadness and irony of the mood rather than to mimic "Babel"-shaped "pink" from a word-laden black and white script. It was simultaneously thus with Clair and Dziga and Lubitsch and Manoelian and Von Sternberg in their early sound films with music, and theirs, among others, are films to be remembered. Their films move in time to the music; they do not stand still while the orchestra is sounding, a la "The Lights of New York" and various duplicates. The cogent theorists who foresaw the static danger, Eisenstein and Pudovkin were two, would they not have appreciated "Hallelujah I'm a Bum"? But almost at once, cogent theory was relegated to the dusty section of the library. Even the Soviet film swerved abruptly toward "realism" in the mid-thirties - not the acute and sharply psychological realism whose seeds are in the clay of creative cinema, but that genre of still-photography where scenes change, there are closeups and talk, usually lots of talk, and unmeaningful fades and dissolves; and perhaps once during the course of the unrolling you become vaguely conscious it is a film you are viewing, A film? Listen, after seeing six or seven Fagnole, Alec Guinesses and Gates of Hell (surely one of the most over-touted films D'Art ever) ain't it just great to haul back to - let's say about 1913 when Griffith was making magic and the Dances were roaring in the North - when films moved, when they were films; and, in the same breath, consider that lustrous handful of early soundies, among others "Hallelujah I'm a Bum", "Delicious", "Monte Carlo", "En Nati", "Alone", "Kozintzev and Trauberg", "The Road to Life" and "Scarsface", the Shames lookalikes of a sound where the sound did more than make sentences or echo a rickety-tick tune; it zoomed, it crescendoed, underlined, muted, emphasised, and built ... for sound was not meant to be merely heard on a fixed level. People were stupefied in 1927 when a pioneer photographed a moving train; but then in 1933 Edwin S. Porter made "The Great Train Robbery", and not only the train moved, the film moved too? Used correctly, what a precious addition to film creation is sound. Bravo Milestone for being "different" - it is that type of disparity which gives us classics.

Incidentally, Milestone was not the first director of the film; he took over when the original choice couldn't cope with the material. Rumors persist that the production was beset with dissention and difficulties. Evidently the experimental nature of the work proved trying on the nerves of those in the company who preferred a less audacious type of film.

The idea of Buenger, leader of the Central Park bums, who falls in love with Angel, the Mayor's "girl"; is loved by her in turn during a tenure in which she suffers from emmasia, and during which the Bum attempts to hold a job and ascribe to convention; and then inevitably loses her when she requires his memory and treatment of the process; leaving him therefore to his former carefree but lonely life as a Knight of the Road, is a bitter-sweet irony that might have been penned by Saroyan. But it was written, before the great Fresno bard came charging out of the West, by Ben Hecht. Hecht's contributions to the talking screen are noteworthy - not only did he contribute a more mature (often raucy) brand of dialogue ("Nothing Sacred"); but he produced two pictures of individual merit in conjunction with Charles MacArthur: "The Scoundrel" and "Crime Without Passion". Hecht was unfairly maligned in the pages of "Films in Review" last year, and the defense of his creative ability is in keeping. Whereas his personal habits and attitudes may be open to question, his sense of character, plot and dialogue are not. His dialogue, for example, whilst not always subtle, is written to make every moment of disillusion as well as uplift. He caught Jarrett Morgan before they made a broad buffoon out of him - suave, knowing,_restoring his reputation as one of the best light comedians to emminate from the New York musical comedy stage. Edgar Connor, Harry Langdon, Chester Conklin - they are just fine; it is worth the price of admission to see and hear Little Harry castigate the plutocrats. But Buenger is no Communist in case anybody is beginning to fear that "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" is leftist propaganda; he reads the "Times" in the morning and the "Dail" at night" and spends the winters in Florida, so no cause for worry.
Midge Evans deserves a paragraph to herself. She certainly is an Angel, not only to a tattered tramp, but to a tattered film idealist as well. She is a combination of all Angels: tender, compassionate, understanding...and so womanly. Verily a Luminous Angel of the shadow world. The Mayor of the Town and Sidney Kingley are Fortunate men — we commiserate with poor Bumper. In only one other picture, by the by, has Miss Evans approached the impression she makes an Angel — and that is in the delightfully rambunctious "The Greeks Had a Word For Them", directed by Lowell Sherman in 1932; a Goldwyn production, it might be added, that is sorely missed from the current cycle at the Museum of Modern Art. It definitely deserves revival.

Milestone's direction: not only poetic, trenchant as well. "Mid all the melody and sentiment there is a sudden grim shot of the mounted cops riding through the park at dusk, ominous phantoms who carry clubs, and the Bums cringe in fear. The world of the film contains a world of nostalgia – there is a boy in white knickerbockers throwing a ball in one of the backgrounds that might have been me, for I was around and all the locales are authentic Central Park – there's the bridge that spans the lake; it still stands, and probably always will. If you want one scene that illustrates as well as anything what cinema means, take the one on the train where Frank Morgan, brimming with love, sits at the piano, begins playing softly and conjures up the highlights of his association with Angel. Here, in a series of probing dissolve, areas of sensation are delicately framed, and in a few minutes of film we are made aware not only of what happened, but the feeling of the happening as well. The character of Len is seen only briefly, but I know him as deeply as anyone in the film, and I sure hope he made a go of that job in Cleveland. Actually you like everybody in the film - except Chester Conklin's wife - because everybody is so damned human. We don't expect Frank Morgan to be a knight gallant here...he's a politician, but he's such a nice guy we don't hold it against him, and we're sure the makers of the film didn't either....and Harry Langdon is Bumper's pal even though he hates plutocrats and peddles the Red line. Maybe there's a lesson in the film that is profound without trying to be.

Mr. Eversen, on another page, has listed the cuts in this truncated print. I don't desire to go over them again at any length: it is too frustrating and sad. I should like to call attention however to two scenes in particular whose omission weakens this version of the film. One sequence has Frank Morgan laying a cornerstone at a Public School, whilst all mixtures of New York kids, faces scrubbed and hair plastered back, sing a patriotic ditty off-key, attended the while by minions of prune-faced teachers. (All teachers in New York during the early thirties were either prune-faced or indelicately fat and sweaty). It is a deliciously sardonic pips of a scene, and o God, I miss it. I do believe that "putting" is the absence of what may be possibly the greatest scene in the whole work. In this portion it appears that Bumper may forfeit his leadership of the Bums, for his erratic behaviour and lack of control over himself have convinced them that he is losing his reason. They bring him to trial in a secluded portion of the Park; and when asked to offer a defense for his bizarre actions, he breaks into a half-coherent, starkly moving monologue to music, in which he tries, without much rationality, to describe his sensations on being in love. It is all strangely poignant, and the film takes on added dimension. May the brigades who perpetrated the saddest, blackest chapter of their days in a vat of boiling celluloid, in that sublime realm of the future where all prints are complete, all women are Angels, and the Brotherhood of Man is at last achieved!

Richard Kraft

As a postscript to Mr. Kraft's comments, I'd like to add that I for one found Miss Evans almost as angelic in "Dinner at Eight"... and that I can't quite agree that the trial sequence was perhaps the film's "greatest scene". Pine stuff it was, but if something had to go, it was more expendable than several other sequences that were happily retained. However...each to his own taste. And of course, the ideal state would be for NOTHING to be cut. That we're all agreed on.

As in "Broadway", there are some interesting pre-Code aspects to the film — not least in the fact that Angel and the Mayor have been living together without, as the cliche 'goes, benefit of clergy'. Under the circumstances it seems such a workable arrangement that one almost resents the hint of marriage in the last reel; never actually stated mind you, but certainly implied when we hear a few chimes of the wedding march from a music-box.

Lastly, a minor correction. Our cast list on page two gives the name of Harold Young which is in error. Young was an editor in 1933, later a director, and has no connection with this film. The name we should have listed is Harold Goodwin — not in the official cast of the film at all, but playing the role of Len.