
Although included in the Rko films sold to television, "The Painted Desert" hasn't yet shown up on the channels, and in all probability it won't. It is more than a little dated, and its sound track is of only passable quality. While not a film of any great importance, it is nevertheless extremely interesting as an example of the medium budget westerns of the very early sound period. Of course, the "in-between" westerns of the thirties were comparatively rare, and thus this would have been a "bigger" film in its time than the equivalent product today ("Wichita", "Gun Glory").

Westerns were in a strange position in this transition period. The "B" westerns went along their merry way, concentrating on action above all else -- Ken Maynard, Buck Jones, Tim McCoy, Hoot Gibson, Tom Keene representing the major company "B" westerns, and Bill Cody, Tom Tyler, Wally Wales, Bob Custer and a host of others representing the independents. The big westerns were few, but really big -- "The Big Trail", "Cimarron", "Billy the Kid" etc.

The westerns that were neither epics, nor "B" pictures, were comparatively few. "The Painted Desert" was probably the best film of this type made in 1931, just as Universal's "Law and Order" was quite certainly the best of 1932 and incidentally, in my opinion at least, one of the best half-dozen westerns from any period. These westerns without epic content were in the awkward position of trying to use intelligent plot material and dialogue, to cash in on the screen's new-found voice, while at the same time working in enough movement and action to offset the static staginess that was so pronounced in so many films of that period. Paramount's Zane Grey series -- a "B" group that was nevertheless generally above average -- didn't manage this too well, and films like "Fighting Caravans" and "Light of the Western Stars" were far too slow and talky. Fox's Zane Grey series (with George O'Brien) was somewhat more satisfactory.

"The Painted Desert" doesn't entirely solve its problem. There is far more talk than action. But it is interesting talk, and the plot itself, apart from a slow opening, moves along quite quickly. Too, as much of the story as possible takes place out of doors, so there are no lengthy dialogue exchanges in box-like interior sets. The outdoor locales are impressive and picturesque; there was, at this time, a determined effort to find fresh and interesting outdoor locations for westerns.

The film's main claim to fame is, of course, Clark Gable, seen here (as the villain) in his first meaty role. Within a year, he was starred at Metro in "Hell Divers", "Susan Lennox" and others, after first getting some more heavy roles under his belt. The minute Gable walks in off the desert and leers at Helen Twelvetrees, he takes the picture away from everyone else. He is so completely the Gable that we soon got to know at Warners and MGM that one wonders why success had been so long coming to him; after all, he had been knocking around in bit roles for a full five years before he made this film. He makes so much of his big showdown scene with Boyd in the final reel that Boyd's victory seems quite a minor one! Boyd himself is as pleasing as ever, and manages a little mild action, though it was to be some time yet before he would be really at home in western roles. (Cliff Lyons and others doubled even the simplest riding scenes for Boyd in the earliest Hopalong Cassidy westerns, and it wasn't until "Bar 20 Rides Again" that he could ride well enough to be
given any running insert closeups. William Farnum and Helen Twelvetrees are, of course, as reliable as ever. Incidentally, although this print is brand new, there are a few missing scenes (totalling less than a minute) due to negative cuts. Certain long shot action scenes - riding, etc. - were apparently removed from the negative and inserted, as stock footage, into the negative of the 1938 remake with George O'Brien. Presumably Rko figured that they'd have no further use for the old version, and didn't even bother to replace the missing sections with dupe negative. And by the time tv rolled around, they'd obviously forgotten all about the deletions. The missing scenes are only long-shot establishing scenes, but since they are all action scenes -- and this film doesn't have any too much action -- they are rather missed, and give slightly jerky continuity to parts of the film. The only important scene that is thus missing however is the big shot of the whole mountain blowing up at the end; it couldn't have run more than six seconds, but it was an impressive sight. Luckily you can see it, if you've a mind to, by tuning in your tv set some time to the last five minutes of the George O'Brien version. Incidentally, the O'Brien one - with good old Fred Kohler as the villain - was only a very casual remake, with a good deal less plotting. Nevertheless, like most of his Rko westerns, it was an exciting and well made little picture.

"THE HOUSEMASTER" (Associated British Picture Corp., 1938) Released in the U.S. by Alliance, and premiered at the Little Carnegie; directed by Herbert Brenon; from the story by Ian Hay; scenario by Dudley Leslie and Elizabeth Meehan; photographed by Otto Kanturek; settings by Cedric Dawe; edited by Flora Newton; production supervisor, Walter C. Mycroft. 8 reels.


Although Herbert Brenon had started out with historical spectaculars ("Ivanhoe") and Annette Kellerman extravaganzas, and was to achieve considerable success with such diversified subjects as Pola Negri's "The Spanish Dancer", "Beau Geste", Chaney's "Laugh Clown Laugh" and the Clara Bow picture "Dancing Mothers", he seemed most at home with sensitive and quiet adaptations of books and plays of an unspectacular nature, and usually of British origin. The two Barrie adaptations, "Peter Pan" and "A Kiss for Cinderella" are outstanding examples; Warwick Deeping's "Sorrell and Son" another. With the exception of "The Case of Sergeant Grischa", Brenon never seemed to hit his stride again in the thirties, and was also saddled with some unappetising material - with which, however, he did his best. Then, in 1935, Brenon left for England to make a group of films for B.I.P. and Associated British. With the exception of the last of the series (1940's competent but routine "The Flying Squad", an Edgar Wallace melodrama) they were all well suited to his particular talents. "The Dominant Sex" was quite a good one, and "Yellow Sands" would especially repay re-viewing. Perhaps best of all was "The Housemaster", even though its rather obvious back projection and occasional lack of production polish tend to date it a little.

Author Ian Hay and director Brenon make an admirable team. Hay's forte has been primarily light farce ("The Middle Watch") and his more serious essays have never been too serious. There has always been a great deal of humanity and, if you like, froth - even whimsy - in Hay's writings. Having tackled Barrie so successfully, Brenon translated Hay to the screen more satisfactorily than had been done before - or since. (The latest filmed Hay, also by Associated British, is "Girls at Sea", a remake of "The Middle Watch", and apparently a very stodgy and unsubtle one).
Not that "The Housemaster" is a great film; I doubt if any great, or even important, work could be made from any Hay story. But it is a warm and human film, and one with a great deal of truth in it. I hope I haven't over-sold it; perhaps as a Britisher I find a nostalgia in it which makes it seem a better film than it really is; but whatever its merits, it is certainly one of the best of Brenon's talkies, and that alone makes it well worthy of study today.

The faults of the film are also those of Hay; one longs for the potentially dramatic strength to crystallise into some really powerful scenes. And once in a while the power does come through. But too often it is dispelled by subsequent flippancies; and it takes rather too long for the dramatic conflicts to get under way. But Brenon was ever a faithful respecter of the values of the original and if that was the way Hay wrote it, that was the way he would film in. (This Brenon foible was particularly noticeable in his stage-like handling of "Peter Pan"). Many episodes are genuinely moving; particularly Kruger's farewell to his boys - a quite beautifully underplayed, simply directed, and sincerely written scene. The classroom episodes are extremely good too, and much of the acting - particularly that of Kruger, and Kynaston Reeves as the headmaster - outstanding. Phillips Holmes has surprisingly little to do, and is probably there only to provide an additional American name, but he plays his big scene (his discovery of his own authority in the classroom) extremely well.

Our print has rather more splices than we would like, but it is quite complete and in reasonably good condition.

Program Notes & Enquiries:
William K. Everson, Hotel Bradford, 210 W. 70th Street, New York City 23.
Committee: Edward S. Corey, Sandra Everson, Charles Shibuk, Dorothy Lovell.

NEXT PROGRAM - Adelphi Hall, MONDAY JANUARY 26th, room 11-C.

JAMES CRUZE's "THE PONY EXPRESS" (1925) Ricardo Cortez, Betty Compson, Wallace Beery, George Bancroft, Ernest Torrence, Frank Lackteen.

and

HERBERT BRENON's "THE SPANISH DANCER" (1923) POLA NEGREI
Wallace Beery - Antonio Moreno
Adolphe Menjou - Kathryn Williams