A Curious Glance Back at 1929

Until 1930 rolled around, 1929 was probably the least distinguished (though far from being the least interesting) year in movie history. "The Crowd" and "White Shadows in the South Seas," in 1928, had drawn the curtain on the silent classics. "Hallelujah" apart, 1929 apparently produced no lasting classics of sound cinema; I use the word "apparently" because happily we are always being surprised, and some quite obscure and neglected work may come to light at any time to be re-appraised. But basically 1929 was a year of transition - of finding out whether old favorites and old themes would hold up in the new medium of sound; of exploiting sound for its own sake; and of rapidly turning into cliches what, with the first words of dialogue, had seemed fresh and inventive. While our program tonight obviously can't try to be representative of 1929 as a whole, it does, we think, cover most of these aspects.


This one-reel condensation of a 12-reeler obviously only covers a few highlights, but it provides a welcome reminder of Doug's last silent -- and his last swashbuckler. Uncertain about sound, he limited it to a spoken foreword, and to music and effects. True, it was longer and more slowly paced than "The Black Pirate" and "The Tachos" had been, but this was probably due more to Doug's respect for story-material by Dumas than to any slowing-down influence of contemporary films. His much earlier "The Three Musketeers" had been very slow too. The comic prologue of "The Holly-cable" apart, "The Iron Mask" was the only film in which Doug ever died, and thus provided a fittingly touching fadeout to his silent swashbucklers.

"Trusting Wives" (Coronet Talking Comedies - Educational release); directed by Lesley Doree; starring Edward Everett Horton with Natalie Moorhead. Two reels.

No decline brought about by the coming of sound was greater than that of the two-reel comedy; thanks to a grand crew of directors, and stars like Laurel & Hardy and Charlie Chase, Hal Roach made the transition better than most. Bennett Flannern, and all over Hollywood one found incredibly inept and unfunny dialogue comedies replacing the wonderfully inventive visual gags of old. Not all were bad however, and some of those that paid off best were built around pre-tested and pre-polished vaudeville routines. As films, these items were often stodgy and static; as comedy however, they were often extremely funny, and now have the added interest of being representative of a disappearing form of humor -- the "routine" which was practised and polished until it became familiar to all, and was all the funnier for it. Not being a particular student of vaudeville, I don't know if this comedy does have its roots there. But it looks like it, and it is certainly a far funnier comedy than Raymond Griffith's "The Silver Torch" (screened last month) which was written specially for the screen. Incidentally, both comedies were directed by the same man. Of course, what really makes "Trusting Wives" pay off is the completely self-assured handling of Edward Everett Horton, getting the very maximum out of every line, and turning it into a static set-up by his own personality and energy.
"ISLE OF LOST SHIPS" (First National) Dir: Irvin Willat; with Jason Robards, Virginia Valli, Noah Beery, Robert Emmett O'Connor. One reel.

A remake of Maurice Tourneur's older Milton Sills vehicle (of 1923 - and how we'd like to see that one!), this "Isle of Lost Ships" was one of the early sound on disc films on which the disc have been apparently lost. Thus it isn't likely to turn up on television. It's grand adventure stuff, fast moving, and with nothing about it to suggest that it was a talkie. Director Willat (whose "The Storm" and "The Michigan Kid" we've also run this year) kept his cameras on the move, and his action lively. The narration is the least successful of producer-editor Robert Youngson's essays in this direction and there are just too many gags; but the matching of music and effects are extremely well done, and the condensation itself is a first-rate job, getting in both the spirit and the highlights of the original nine reels.

- Intermission -

"SAY IT WITH SONGS" (Warner Bros., 10 reels) Dir: Lloyd Bacon; story by Darryl F. Zanuck; starring Al Jolson, with Marion Nixon, Davey Lee, Holmes Herbert, Kenneth Thompson, Fred Kohler, Frank Campeau.

"Say it With Songs", Jolson's third film, apparently was constructed on the theory that since "The Singing Fool" was twice as schmaltzy as "The Jazz Singer", this one would pay off even better if the sentiment was doubled yet again! What emerges is undoubtedly the saddest and coolest of all of the Jolson pictures; happily someone must have realised that disaster lay ahead, and called a halt. Even Jolson never again became quite as childishly banal as here, while director Bacon soon went to quite the opposite extreme with the brittle and quite unsentimental "42nd Street". In every sense of the word, "Say It With Songs" is a period piece and as such requires patience and a little kindness. It is a film very cloyingly destroyed by laughter (which it does not deserve) and when all is said and done, its sentiment does reflect a happier world (yes, even with the depression) than do the hard-bitten, savage and quite unsentimental films of today.

Its greatest asset is also its greatest liability -- namely, Al Jolson. His ego and bombast are often intolerable, his child-like "dramatics" plumb the depths of bathos. And yet that child-like quality gives him a certain appeal too -- he is so obviously sincere in his efforts, and such a great showman when he swings into a number, that one is inclined to forget the whole thing rather than analyne his appeal. Jolson's place in show business is assured; legions revere him, and probably legions more adore him. Further discussion of Jolson as a personality is perhaps superfluous, except to add that the film Jolson himself hated the most (Levis Milestone's lovely and fragile "Hallelujah! I'm a Fug") was quite certainly his best -- and the one where he was toned down to a point almost resembling normality.

"Say It With Songs" starts slowly. (When it hits tv, I'm sure there'll be a gigantic cut in the first 2 reels). Then it hits its stride, song follows song (every other one seems to be a rehash of the lucubrious "Little Pal", designed obviously as a follow-up to "Sonny Boy"), and cliche piles on cliche without recite. Everything - situation A to situation Z - is jamed into this one, the only break from convention being the off-beat casting of old Fred Kohler as a friendly and philosophical (!) convict. Davey Lee goes through his rages as before as a loving but rather dense son, who isn't much help at his father's murder trial. Incidentally, the scene of his accident in the street were reused by Warners a year later when Lew Ayres' kid brother was run over in "Doorway to Hell"! -- Walter K. Everson

Next program - March 29 - comedy show - Laurel & Hardy & Charlie Chase in SONS OF THE DESERT; "Troupe in China" (Sennett-Turpin); "Galloping Bungalow" (Sennett-Bevan); "Napoleon Jr." (Fox, '24) "In Loving Memory" (Swain) etc., etc.