Two films from 1924

"A Truthful Liar" (Hal Roach-Fathes) 2 reels. Dir: Hampton del Ruth
Photographed by Robert Doran; starring Will Rogers,
with Richard Pennell, Beth Darlington, Madge Hunt, Jack Cooper, Jack
Ackroyd.

Will Rogers' 2-reelers for Roach, many of which he wrote and/or directed
himself, were of an astonishingly inconsistent quality. Some, Ware great:
"Uncensored Movies" and "Don't Park There". Others, like "Rustling Hank",
were sheer abominations and time-wasters. Yet others - "Two Wagon's Both
Covered" is typical - were sad disappointments mainly because Rogers'
talent for barbed satire were at a low ebb. "A Truthful Liar", if not
one of the two or three really outstanding ones, is still one of his best,
quite elaborately mounted, and mixing slapstick and satire in quite
pleasant doses. This one features a particularly genial lampoon of King
George the 5th, though one assumes that Pathe were diplomatic enough
not to offer the comedy for British release.

"THE SEA HAWK" (First National) 12 reels. Produced and directed by
Frank Lloyd; adapted from Sabatini's novel by J.G. Hawks;
edited by Edward M. Roskam; photographed by Norbert Brodine;
director of research, Wm. J. Reiter; art director, Stephen Goonon;
titles by Walter Anthony; ships designed and executed by Fred Gabourie;
costuming, Walter J. Israel.

Starring MILTON SILLS, with Enid Bennett, Lloyd Hughes, Wallace Beery,
Wallace MacDonald, Marc McDermott, Frank Currier, Medea Radzima, William
Collier jr., Lionel Belmore, Fred de Silva, Hector V. Sarco, Albert
Priscoe, George E. Romaine, Christine Montt, Edwards Davis, Henry Barrows.

For a long time, we've wanted an opportunity to show an important Frank
Lloyd silent; and we've wanted a Milton Sills vehicle. That "The Sea Hawk"
is a sad disappointment on many counts doesn't altogether lessen its
interest.

Opening at the Astor on Monday June 2nd, 1924, it played there for 18
profitable weeks -- and then gave way to "Captain Blood". A huge critical
and popular success, it made almost every "Beat Ten" listing of the year,
usually in first or second place. When "The Film Daily" combined all the
polls into one, "The Thief of Bagdad" beat it by only one vote. In third
place, with 15 fewer votes, was "Konsieur Beauchair", followed by, in
Commandments", "Girl Shy", "Abraham Lincoln" and "America". (One paper
went overboard a little by selecting the "52 best pictures of the year"!!!)

It would seem that critics and public alike were affected by the same
kind of mass hypnotism that was let loose when the recent "Ben Hur"
opened. The reviews are all raves - one finds frequent references to
the fortune the picture must have cost, the opulence of settings, the
fast-action. "Film Daily" called it Lloyd's biggest and best by far (which
it may have been), and commented "the story speeds along ...... moves like
lightning ... you would never know this was 12 reels".

Now tastes can't have changed so much. Off-hand I can't think of a big
sea spectacle prior to "The Sea Hawk", so maybe it impressed then more
than it normally would. But after all, audiences were used to the big
spectacle shows. Only that year they'd had "America", "The Iron Horse" & "The Thief of Bagdad". Unlike today's audiences, they knew what spectacle really was. Despite one unfortunate aspect of our print, which I'll get to in a minute, "The Sea Hawk" is a second-string spectacle compared to the then prevailing standards set by Griffith, Fairbanks, John Ford and Herbert Brenon.

When I first ran this print some three weeks ago, I was appalled at the lack of sea action, and indeed in our initial notes I commented on this and warned you not to expect too much. What sea action there was, very choppyly presented in two sequences, looked as though it had been cheaply staged, and worsened by the removal of odd, hypoed scenes which made it look even more carelessly done. Tonight I wrote a whole set of program notes based on such an interpretation of the film and then, after the notes were written, I scrutinised some sections of the film again carefully on a viewer. There, in two sections (both in the first half of the film, in reels five and six) I found minute notes scrawled on to a single frame of film. One merely said "Scene missing". The other said "14 scenes missing". This obviously puts a completely different complexion on the whole matter, and makes completely understandable the film's huge success. "Robin Hood" and "Thief of Bagdad" were long and ponderous films too, redeemed by spectacular highlights. Two big action sequences inserted into "The Sea Hawk" (even if badly placed, in the first half of the film) could make a tremendous amount of difference. I apologise for this late and accidental discovery; but how thankful I am that the discovery was made before these notes were blatantly unfair to Frank Lloyd, and went out into the world to add to the already over-abundant supply of distorted film history.

Why is the material missing? Presumably Warners in later years saw no great point in preserving the whole film, and removed the big scenes to add to their stock shot library. I've suspected that certain silent stock shots in the Flynn "Captain Blood" and "The Sea Hawk" came from this picture. Ironically, the film has been preserved, and a new negative made, while the big scenes that were intended for preservation have probably gotten sidetracked into some vault on the coast.

The original release length of "The Sea Hawk" was 12,045 feet. I've measured the length of this 16mm print, converted the footage to 35mm, and find that we have a discrepancy of about a reel. Presumably some five minutes devoted to each battle. The disappointment is lessened to a degree (for me at least) by the realisation that the film isn't quite the lack-lustre affair that I originally assumed --- but it is a sad disappointment nonetheless.

Even anticipating the very best for the missing battles, the critics do seem however (as in the case of the recent "Ben Hur") to have been unduly kind to the rest of the film, for it is in many ways quite primitive, and often seems a far earlier production than 1924. "The Sea Hawk" (with its production based in New York) has passable production values, though too many of the so-called "big" sets have a cramped look about them. But some of the crowd scenes, particularly the vigorous episode of the interrupted wedding and the abduction, have real punch and power, while the exotic slave market sequence ("She is white as the snows upon the mountain... buy her for my harem!") is grand fun. Its story is exceptionally strong, and it is a pity that production values and direction don't always match it. As a swashbuckler the Flynn remake is undoubtedly a superior job, if one can really call it a remake. The galley sequences apart, there is not the slightest plot link between the two.

Among the critics, the NY World said that Noah Beery gave easily the best
performance in the film. And Wallace Beery does, the film literally leaping to life when he grimmaces his way into it. Milton Sills, ill at ease and badly directed, gives a very stiff and posey performance — the kind of performance that people who know nothing about silent film acting think is typical of that period. However, the NY Sun found, "the customarily prosaic and uninteresting Milton Sills has suddenly become very Sabatini", and Film Daily remarked "Sills in ruffles and court costume is not as interesting as Sills the he-man when he strips down for the galley-slave stuff". All the critics seemed agreed that Enid Bennett was inadequate, although she faithfully goes through her old "Robin Hood" role all over again — even to accepting the hero’s knife as a suicide weapon should worst come to worst. There are some familiar faces in the supporting cast too, including those perennial weaklings Lloyd Hughes (again the no-good brother) and William Collier Jr.

As "The Sea Hawk" was going into release, as part of a First National "special" group along with "The Lost World", "Secrets", "Abraham Lincoln" and "Sundown", Fritz Lang came out with some interesting statements from Germany. The director who was later to make three westerns said "I would never dream of attempting to make a cowboy film. I could do it no more than the Americans could make historical films. How could they? They have no history!" Without going into that particular line of thought, it is interesting to speculate on just why certain directors insist on building reputations for one kind of film, when their talents so clearly lie elsewhere. Why did Henry King, a wonder at Americans, have to give us four mediocrities like "Romola" or "David and Bathsheba" for every "Tol'able David"?

Somewhere along the line Frank Lloyd allowed himself to be convinced that he was a master of historical spectacle. His silent "A Tale of Two Cities" I didn’t see, but "The Sea Hawk" and the dismal "Eagle of the Sea" (about Jean Lafitte) certainly proved otherwise as far as his silent period was concerned, and "Rulers of the Sea", "Wells Fargo" (the dullest of all super-westerns), "The Howards of Virginia" and several others confirmed that this applied to his talkies as well. So many of his films — including non-spectacles like "Son of the Gods" — were monuments to tedium. Ironically, he seemed to hit his real stride with cinematic adaptations of stage plays — "Berkeley Square" and "Cavalcade", both from the early thirties, were among Lloyd’s first films. "Mutiny on the Bounty" is rather an exception perhaps, but I can’t help feeling that Lloyd was exceedingly fortunate there, and that given that script, that budget and those players mouthing those classic lines, even Sam Neufield or William Berke could have come up with quite a picture too! The mutiny itself, even Bligh’s voyage in the open boat, aren’t especially well directed sequences. When one thinks of "Mutiny on the Bounty" one recalls the Laughton-Gable exchanges before all else — which may well indicate that Lloyd was a good director, but do not confirm that he was a good spectacle director.

Having down-played "The Sea Hawk" rather consistently — perhaps due to a hangover from my initial unjustified disappointment — I hope you’ll be pleasantly surprised by much of it. With some imagination to fill in the gaps, it still remains an interesting film on many counts. One real regret is that we couldn’t locate a print of Mack Sennett’s 1924 takeoff, "The Sea Squawk", to round off the program.

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William K. Everson ---

Our next show — Next Sunday (29th) — New Yorker Theatre, 9.30 a.m.
FRITZ KORTNER in MATA HARI, THE RED DANGER (German, 1926)
PAT O’MALLEY, CARMELITA GERAGHTY in THE SLAVER (U.S., 1927)