WILLIAM K. HOWARD and FRANK CAPRA -- two early films

CAPTAIN FLY BY NIGHT (FBO, 1922) Dir: William K. Howard; photographed by Lucien Andriot; scenario, Eve Unsell, from a story by Johnston McCulley; editor, J.B. Morely; art director, W.L. Heywood; 5 reels; Starring JOHNNY WALKER with Shannon Day, Francis McDonald, Eddie Gribbon, Charlie Stevens, Victory Bateman, James McElhern, Kit Guard

William K. Howard, like W.S. Van Dyke, was an expert and underrated director, too often dismissed as a "commercial director" (as though that in itself were a crime) because he worked swiftly, efficiently, and came up with pictures that made money. That he was a creative director and an artist as well is certainly proven by such later works as "White Gold", "Transatlantic" and "The Power and the Glory". Some of his best work was done in the field of action and melodrama however, where he added to the excitement by fast pacing, and lively camerawork with multitudinous (but never "arty") angles. "Captain Fly By Night" is one of his earlier efforts, made at a time when he had only just left the distribution side of the business to try directing, and was concentrating on action subjects with Johnny Walker (who remained a close friend and business associate until Howard's death) and stuntman Richard Talmadge. For a newcomer to direction, this film is really quite expertly made, moving along quickly, really well photographed, and with plenty of lively action, chases and stunts. The story by Johnston McCulley is an obvious plagiarism from his own "The Curse of Capistrano", better known as "The Mark of Zorro". He hasn't strained himself too much in dreaming up a new frame for the basic story, and many of the individual situations, characters and even subtitles are almost identical -- especially the action revolving around the sergeant, as played here by Eddie Gribbon, and by Noah Beery in the Fairbanks film. And Charlie Stevens, needless to say, is harassed as much by Eddie as he was by Noah!

FBO, one of the most enterprising independent companies of the 20's, turned out some really solid little actioners with Bob Custer, Bob Steele, Tom Tyler, Fred Thomson, Tom Mix and Richard Talmadge. They packed their films with real production values -- solid looking sets, plenty of extras, and first rate photographic qualities. Deriving from the old Robertson-Cole company, FBO itself became RKO Radio in later years. Surprisingly few of their films seem to have survived the years -- none of the Tom Mix westerns, to my knowledge, and but two or three of the Fred Thomsons.

"Captain Fly By Night", at any rate, unpretentious though it is, is a solidly made and thoroughly entertaining programmer, a welcome reminder of what good little films FBO turned out, and what an accomplished director Howard was from the very beginning of his career.

Intermission

THAT CERTAIN THING (Columbia, 1928) Dir: Frank Capra; prod: Harry Cohn Story by Elmer Harris; titles by Al Boasberg; photographed by Joseph Walker; edited by Arthur Roberts; Art Director, Robert E. Lee. 7 reels. Starring VIOLA DANA, with Ralph Graves, Burr McIntosh, Aggie Herring.

From the mid-20's on, most of Hollywood's queens de-glamourised themselves once in a rare while, and tried to "identify" with their audience by playing an average young miss. "Average" usually meant being a shopgirl or a telephone
operator. Despite some flights of fancy, Gloria Swanson probably came closest to reasonable realism in "Manhandled". For the rest, the films were patently the old Cinderella stories in a new guise, though not without charm. Colleen Moore landed millionaire Jack Mulhall in "Orchids and Ermine"; stock girl Mary Pickford landed boss's son Buddy Roeg(e's in "My Best Girl" (a delightful and undeservedly forgotten comedy), and here it's Viola Dana going after - and getting - millionaire Ralph Graves. Except that, this being a Capra film, millionaire Ralph is disinherited and has to climb from rags to riches all over again -- though not exactly in the proverbial "hard way".

The plot of "That Certain Thing" doesn't bear much examination -- nor was it intended to. ("My Best Girl" has even less plot and is even more diverting because of it!) Frank Capra, fresh from Sennett and Langdon, keeps it flowing along easily with a slight gag here, a neat bit of business there, and a thorough sense of how to put a film together. The simple scene of Ralph Graves carrying his bride through their honeymoon apartment is smoothly and unobtrusively broken up into a series of moving camera shots. Each little sequence has a neat little "wrap-up" piece of business -- the turtle bit, the routine with the wheelbarrow. Plot-cliches are approached and then adroitly sidestepped. And a basically cheap production is made to look polished and expensive by sheer film-making knowhow. As always, Capra makes extensive use of exteriors -- there's a long and most enjoyable sequence atop a Hollywood bus. Part of Columbia's studio wall is employed in the "men at work" sequence. The night-club sequence is largely stock footage, but so neatly is it matched up with the newly filmed scenes that one hardly notices. And for the rest, Capra makes the maximum use of standing studio street and other sets.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of all is that the film doesn't date one iota. There's never any sense of "old movie" either in plot content or style, other than the sad knowledge that so trifling a plot would never get past the synopsis stage today. With the addition of a simple sound track, "That Certain Thing" would seem thoroughly modern -- far more so in fact than "Platinum Blonde" and some of Capra's more serious talkies of the early 30's. Al Boasberg's snappy titles help to keep it extra lively too.

Much of the bare bones of its plot can be considered blueprint material for later Capras, although his "common people" here are curiously unpleasant and vindictive -- none of those "salt of the earth" Regis Toomey, Tom Fadden and Henry Travers types that good up so many of his later films. There is however an interesting looking flapper trying desperately, and mainly via her hair style, to look like Louise Brooks!

Ralph Graves, by now a veteran of Griffith and Sennett, was on the verge of his greatest popularity -- mainly in the actioners he made opposite Jack Holt, also for Capra. But he tumbled to obscurity again for no obvious reason within only a year or so. Viola Dana, like Eleanor Boardman in "The Crowd", impresses one at first as being rather plain and ordinary; and then literally grows on you as the film progresses. She is really most moving in the more dramatic scenes. But "That Certain Thing" never stays dramatic for too long, and Capra keeps it bowling merrily along with a good gag on hand every time it looks as though it's getting a little too serious.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---

Next show -- Sunday next, April 30th -- New Yorker Theatre, 9.30 a.m.

Carmine Gallone's silent CYRANO DE BURGERAC (10 reels, color) and shorts -- misc. hand-colored and other early color items.