Early Sound Films: 1929-1932

"Jed's Vacation" (A Paramount-Christie Talking Play, 1929) Directed by Raymond Kane; from a stage sketch written by Charlie Grapewin; starring Charlie Grapewin. One reel.

The primary reason for our exhibition of "Jed's Vacation" today is the marked contrast it offers with "Applause" - made some five months later, for the same company. Like many of the early sound films, regardless of whether they were short or feature length, "Jed's Vacation" operates on the theory that talk is all that matters. There's nothing filmic about it at all, and the sketch itself is pretty tame too, although it's always good to watch Charlie Grapewin. Unimportant, it's nevertheless typical, and quite a diverting little reel.

"The Wide Open Spaces" (Rko-Fathe, 1932) Directed by Arthur Rosson; story by Walter Weems and Edward Earle; photographed by Ted McCord; presented by the Hollywood Masquers Club, with Ned Sparks, William Farnum, Antonio Moreno, Dorothy Sebastian, George Cooper, Claude Gillingwater, Frank McHugh, Tom Dugan, George Chandler, Walter Hiers, Mack Swain, Clyde Cook, Mathew Betz, Robert Frazer, Earle Foxe, Wade Boteler, John St. Polis, Richard Carlyle, Charles Delaney, Eddie Kane & others. 2 reels

As a spoof on westerns, "The Wide Open Spaces" has some very funny moments and some rather labored ones. With so many veteran players to hand a line or a scene to, it's hard at times to fit everyone in and still keep to the satire. Fortunately for us today, the nostalgic pleasure of seeing these old-timers again makes up for the hit-and-miss quality of the humor. Dorothy Sebastian is especially appealing as the heroine in what seems to be a good-natured gibe at the Dorothy Gish of the "Nugget Nell" era. One star you may spot though he isn't listed is Ken Maynard -- he appears in all the spectacular riding scenes at the end, since they are lifted from his silent feature "Red Raiders".

"Applause" (Paramount, 1929) Directed by Rouben Mamoulian; adapted by Garrett Fort from the novel by Beth Brown; photographed by George Folsey; 9 reels. The Cast: HELEN MORGAN (Kitty Darling) Joan Peers (April Darling) Fuller Mellish Jr. (Hitch Nelson) Jack Cameron (Joe King) Henry Wadsworth (Tony)

So few "lost masterpieces" stand up to their legendary reputations when, after 25 years or more, they suddenly become available again. "Applause" is one that does, not only because it's a good film, but also because one hasn't built up an unconscious wall of resistance against it through over-touting by the "official" historians. Very little has ever been written about "Applause"; it is remembered and revered more by film-makers themselves than by critics and writers; and it is remembered too -- with affection -- by filmgoers who saw it at the time. Presumably it also is one of Mamoulian's own favorite films; certainly it is the only one of his own films that he referred to when he was the M.G.M. at Eastman House's second Film Festival -- and he referred to it frequently, and with obvious pride.

A pictorially imaginative and dramatically tender work that bears comparison with the British "Shooting Stars", it is perhaps as notable a "first film" as was Welles' "Citizen Kane", and in many ways it was even more remarkable. Mamoulian's prior work had all been on the stage; not only was he coming to a completely new medium, but it was a medium that had only just undergone a revolution itself. His crew was almost as new to sound films as he was to film of any kind, and many of his initial ideas met with instant opposition. In the current "Sight and Sound", Mamoulian spends some time outlining the trouble he had getting the sound and photographic effects he wanted from
reluctant technicians. (Unfortunately the article offers no critical or personal analysis of this particular film). In a sense, a 1929 "New Wave" film, it certainly shows that a film of this type doesn't have to be ugly, crude and inept, and reveals most of today's New-Wavers for the phoney and/or amateurs that most of them are.

The National Board of Review voted "Applause" the best film of 1929, but its boxoffice performance was not striking. It opened with much ballyhoo at the Criterion (with a vaudeville bill headed by the Yacht Club Boys in support), but it was another Paramount film playing across the road at the Rialto that was really coining the money -- Moran and Mack, the Two Black Crows, in "Why Bring That Up?". At the end of the year, when exhibitors voted on the Ten Best, it was nowhere in sight. (The Top Ten, in order, were DISRAELI, THE BROADWAY MELODY, MADAME X, RIO RITA, GOLD Diggers OF BROADWAY, BULLDOG DRUMMOND, THE COCKEYED WORLD, IN OLD ARIZONA, LAST OF MRS CHEYNNE and HALLELUJAH). Not too surprisingly perhaps, not a silent among them -- although several, and some good ones, were released in 1929. Perhaps nobody was too surprised by the comparative commercial failure of "Applause" though; "Film Daily" predicted it in its review which read (in part): "An artistic, interesting production with a splendid star performance. But dubious stuff for general audiences. There is a melancholy undercurrent, may provoke censor trouble. Outstanding features are careful and refreshingly new direction, a knockout performance from Helen Morgan, and a brand of photography which is as excellent as we've seen to date -- will appeal to Class Houses".

Photographically it is superb; sometimes mystical, sometimes bizarre, always interesting. If it reminds one of Roland West sometimes, it is equally akin to later Cocteau films (some shots especially remind one of "Les Parents Terribles") so one can hardly accuse Kamouelian of "borrowing" style. It is wholly his, as those who know his later works (especially the charming and beautiful "Love Me Tonight") will recognize. It is a director's film -- and, though Helen Morgan is quite fine in the leading role, however, it is not by any means a vehicle for her, and Morgan fans (now as probably then) may be disappointed as she has comparatively little singing to do -- and that more in a dramatic than a "show-biz" sense.

"Applause" was one of the Paramount films photographed at their Astoria, Long Island Studios. Some of their finest silents were shot there ("A Kiss for Cinderella") as well as some of their less important but equally delightful ones ("King on Main Street"). Valentino held sway there for a while, as did La Swanson, safely out of Pola Negri's reach. Their sound films were hampered a little by the lack of a large-sized back lot. Exterior scenes were usually created inside, on the sound stages, since the cumbersome equipment in those early sound days made location shooting difficult. Some of the interior-exterior, like the Brooklyn bridge love scene, were perhaps not as polished as they might have been had they been shot on the West Coast. But when films like APPLAUSE, CRIME WITHOUT PASSION, THE SCOUNDREL and CANARY MURDER CASE resulted, one would be churlish indeed to quibble! I visited these studios a couple of weeks ago (The Army Signal Corps holds forth there now, making training films) and the studio is still much as it was -- a vast film-making plant with some really fine stages. And it was economically utilised too -- many parts of the studio, with a little dressing here and there, serve well for sets quite apart from the regular stages. Those of you who know the studios will spot a lot of such usage in both APPLAUSE tonight and CRIME WITHOUT PASSION next month.

The ending is as in the book, but without the book's maudlin quality. However, it is shot in such a way as to suggest that maybe a grimmer ending was also shot, and possibly used for European consumption. Whether this is so or not, the ending as it stands is still powerful and poignant and a worthy wrap-up to a still most remarkable film.

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