THE DARK HORSE


Without being in any way either a masterpiece or a milestone, "The Dark Horse" is a pugnent and fast-moving political satire in the typical no-holds-barred Warner tradition of the thirties -- the more notable because it was made in an election year, and doesn't hesitate to kid politics for being corrupt, and the public for being safe. It pre-dates the Preston Sturges satire on many of them wholly or partially political, by almost a decade, and unlike Sturges, it doesn't soften its ultimate punch by wisecracks, innuendo and deliberate fairy story. On the other hand, one shouldn't judge "The Dark Horse" by the standards one would apply to a stables film. Delightful and uninhibited as it now seems in retrospect, it was after all, only a programmer with no very lofty aims, and when -- as happens toward the end -- the edge of political satire is softened in favor of story-line and more conventional comedy material, one really can't blame it for not attempting to go quite as tawdry as fervently as a "Front Page" or a "Nothing Sacred". Certainly, for a comparatively minor production, it carries quite a wallop and doesn't concern itself with whose nose it tweaks -- and like all good satire, it is frighteningly near the truth, as a casual perusal of any daily newspaper will show.

Alfred E. Green, never a brilliant craftsman, and perhaps better suited to the "30's" Moore and Mary Pickford vehicles he had done so well in the 20's, nevertheless manages moving along quickly, aided by the flawless type-casting of all the familiar Warner faces -- Frank McHugh and Guy Kibbee right down the line to dear old Barton Churchill. In his element as a blustering and (of course) completely phony politician. And in the lead, Warren William, constantly telling us that the character shouldn't be taken seriously, could only have been bettered by Barrymore, who would have told us that the actor playing the character shouldn't be taken seriously either. Bottie Davis, in her tenth film (her biggest role to date, and next to "The Man Who Played God", her most important) is so good that one wonders anew why she was so bad in some of the films that followed -- "Fashions of 1934" in particular.

INTERMISSION

"TAXI" Dir: Roy Del Ruth; adapted from the play "Blind Spot" by Kenyon Nicholson; screenplay by Robert Easiom & John Bright; photographed by James Van Trees; 3 reels.

With James Cagney, Loretta Young, George E. Stone, Dorothy Burgess, Ray Cook, Matt McHugh, Lella Bennett, Guy Kibbee, George MacFadian, Nat Pendleton, Barton Churchill, David Landau, Donald Cook, Evelyn Knapp, George Karp.

Following the success of "The Public Enemy" Warners found themselves in the awkward position of having a dynamic new personality in Cagney, with an aggressive, college-type movie that was turning to the public, but that properly belonged in the villain role that would present him as becoming a really top star. The result was a series of unappealing "hero" roles in which Warners attempted to harness the Cagney aloofness to leading men who were roughnecks but were at least basically on the side of the law. In time sufficient humor creep into the characterization for it to pay off, but initially, as far as the Cagney image was a rather unpleasant one. In an attempt to duplicate the grasp-squeezing flavor of "Public Enemy", Cagney is called upon to put out excruciatingly physical and verbal treatment to Loretta Young; but the situation and the motivation are hardly the same, and the end result is a complete loss of sympathy for Cagney. And his conduct in the off-screen of the film would certainly have earned him a healthy prison term a couple of years later when the production code boys were a little stricter. As it is, an unenviable Cagney is left on the loose, and one can't help but wonder about the ultimate "success" of his marriage.
But, the Cagney consideration apart, "Taxi" is loads of fun. That it starts off like a rowdy old action gangster melodrama and then pulls on the brakes, turning itself into straight, more personal, melodrama, is only an initial disappointment. There's more than enough raw drama and uninhibited comedy to compensate for the lack of blazing machine guns and gang wars. As if enjoying a last good filing before the screen slammed itself up in 1933, almost all the tunes are cheerfully broken -- especially the racist ones. There's a prolonged (and very funny) Jewish gag at the beginning; a Negro night-club cals itself "The Cotton-Pickers' Club"; and so on. The dialogue includes a barbed line threat at the Warners for having let Cable go, and in a particularly enjoyable movie sequence (Cagney, at the movie, doesn't seem to like anyone!) Lil Dagover, Joe E. Brown, Donald Cook and John Barrymore are all put in their place.

For the rest, there's a gutsy little story, an unexpected sequence with George Raft, an endless parade of Warners' old faces, and of course that colorful Cagney lingo which didn't get much past 1931. (Released in '32, "Taxi" was made in 1931 -- and anyone in it that Cagney doesn't like is automatically a "wet smack".)

As with "The Dark Horse", "Taxi" is primarily a programmer. It's short, inexpensive, using all those substantial standing sets of saloon, street and dance hall, and unambitious. But it has vigor, pace and a certain integrity. As long as one doesn't expect a "Public Enemy" or a "G-Men", and doesn't judge it by those standards, it should be an extremely rewarding little film, and today, certainly, it is an unfamiliar one. (I have hopes that the excellent and almost completely forgotten "Doorway to Hell" will turn up one of these days too).

Those of you with good memories who are yet sure you haven't seen "Taxi" before, may be nonplussed by the apparent familiarity of the story. The explanation is probably that you saw the "unofficial" but quite faithful remake, "Waterfront". Made in 1959 by Warners, it was much simplified, much toned down (especially in the climax) and afflicted with an objectionably zealous priest who reformd the hero, but it retained all of the incident and even much of the dialogue of the original. Beulah Morgan was the hero, Ward Bond the villain, Gloria Dickson the heroine, and Marle Wilson her girl-friend (possibly the only improvement on the original, and that a slight one, but anything is preferable to Leila Bennett!) Warners made a practice of such remakes of course, and practically everything from the thirties was already a remake or was later remade. Paul Muni's "Hi Nellie!" probably holds the record -- including the 1934 original, there were FIVE Warner versions of that little work.

Next program -- Tuesday next -- A program of MYSTERY --

"THE CANARY MURDER CASE" (1929) with William Powell as Philo Vance, Louise Brooks as The Canary and Jean Arthur, James Hall, Eugene pallette, Lawrence Grant, etc.

Plus a reel of Highlights from Paul Leni's "THE LAST WAKING" (1926) with laure LaPlante, John Bolea, Bert Roach, Jack Swan, Burr McIntosh.

And -- via excerpts -- a survey of the movie melodram of the 30's -- Charlie Chan, Sherlock Holmes, Poirot, Buxton Blake etc.

**NOTE:
A number of members have asked us about the delayed showing at the New Yorker of the Marx Brothers' GOING.CURIOUS, Dan Talbot confirmed today that it quite definitely WOULD be shown, though probably not now until February. If anything should happen to change his plans, we have a print available too, so you can be quite sure of not missing it.**