A ROUBEN MAHOLLIAN CYCLE

Program One: APPLAUSE (1929); CITY STREETS (1931)

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

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 just that - 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 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 is also one of Mamoulian's own favorites; 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 plotorically 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 ideas initially met with opposition. In a recent "Sight and Sound", Mamoulian spent some time outlining the trouble he had getting the sound and photographic effects he wanted from reluctant technicians. Several visual effects are uneven and ill-timed long for more bravura than the crew considered them a complete waste of time, and confident that they would be scrapped, expended little care on them). Unfortunately the article offers no critical or personal analysis of this particular film, probably because there had been no opportunity to re-see it. 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 inert, and reveals most of today's New-Wavers for the phonyes and/or amateurs that most of them are.

The National Board of Review voted "Applause" the best picture of 1929, but its boxoffice performance was not striking. It opened with much ballyhoo at the Criterion, concentrating its advertising guns on Helen Morgan (whose first film it was) and with a vaudeville bill headlined by the Yacht Club Boys in support. But it was another Paramount film playing across the road at the Halcyon that was really coining the money -- Morgan & 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 were DISRASIZE, THE BROADWAY MUSEUM, UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, THE AMERICAN WAY, THE COOKED SERVER, CITY OF INDIAN SPRINGS, THE WILD ROSE, A TALL TALE, OLD ACQUAINTANCE, AND THE WHITE OAKS OF OLD ARIZONA."

Not too surprisingly perhaps, not a silent among them - although several good ones were released in '29. Perhaps nobody was too surprised by the comparative commercial failure of "Applause" though; "Film Daily" predicted it with a review that 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 the silent German cinema at times, or of Roland West on other occasions, it is equally akin to later Godard films (some shots especially remind one of "Les Parents Terribles") so one can hardly accuse Mamoulian of "borrowing". It is wholly his own, with a lovely and painful visual style. He was soon to abandon -- though not entirely after the enchanting "Love Is Tonight" as a Director's film all the way, this "Applause", although Helen Morgan is quite superb in the lead.

However, it is not by any means a "vehicle" for her; and Morgan fans (now as probably then) may be disappointed in that she has comparatively little singing to do - and that more in a dramatic than a "show biz" sense. Few films with back-stage stories have made so few attempts to build the song and dance elements; here they are deliberately played down, and thanks to the crude mixing of various tracks, the balances are often off and the sound quality thoroughly out-of-hand. (Mamoulian insisted on using more than one track and mixing an every-day procedure now, but a complicated one in 1929).
"Applause" was one of the Paramount films photographed at their Astoria, Long Island, studio. Some of their finest clients were shot there ("A Kiss for Cinderella") as well as less important but equally dull films like "the way of the woolly". The location of Applause was a lack of a large-stage setting, and although the stunning opening of "Applause" was very much in line with the early sound days, it was not a shot, but the opening of "Applause" could be made of limited space. Exterior scenes were often filmed on location, and even when the stage was available, the interior scenes were shot there for lack of an authentic location in "Applause", but they are shot silent and interior with studio footage. Some of the interior-exteriors, like the Brooklyn Bridge love scene, are perhaps not as polished as they might have been had they been shot on location. The West Coast. But when films like APPLAUSE, CRIME WITHOUT PASSION and CITY STREET resulted, one be grudging indeed to quibble.

the ending of the film is much 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.

INTERMISSION

CITY STREETS

(Paramount, 1931) Directed by Rouen Manoullian; Original story (written for the screen) by Dashiell Hammett; scenario by Max Marcin, Oliver H.P. Garrett; photographed by Lee Garmess.


Length: 8 reels.

Second films rarely measure up to auspicious "firsts" and "City Streets" compares with "Applause" much as "The Magnificent Ambersons" compared with "Citizen Kane". Manoullian was in Hollywood now, and while it would be unfair to say that he'd learned what "wasn't done" (things that, when they are done, are usually made for better movies!), he no longer had quite the same spirit of invincible adventure attendant with one's first film. (But the spirit was only dampened, not destroyed; much of it remained, and it returned in full measure in "Love Me Tonight".) Manoullian's problem was the same one that confronted Welles with "Ambersons" -- a wonderful style to squander on unworthy material. Not that there is anything wrong with Dashiell Hammett's story -- it's good, biting, gangster stuff, a good deal better than most of the then-current cycle, but material better suited to a Wallman or a Mayo than to technique-conscious Manoullian. Nevertheless, Manoullian has made more than the most of the opportunities at his disposal, if one can assume that most of the pictorial effects and devices originated with him rather than in Hammett's writing, a fairly safe assumption. Hammett for example, would hardly have taken such pains to ensure that the four singularly brutal murders are all cut off, that all the characters are evil, detestable, but fascinating; even while they are demonstrating that all the characters are evil. They have a certain inimitable cameraderie, but they are more honest than Lang's criminals; petty vengeance and greed are their principal motivating factors. And unlike Lang's crooks, they win out in the end. The law is not an obstacle; there is not even a color; the man to his tools, to his tools.

Dashiell Hammett's contribution is far from negligible, although hardly in the same league as his "The Maltese Falcon". However, he creates a remarkably convincing, unglamorous and appropriately seedy picture of the Underworld in all its paths.

The prohibition era. His picture is grim picture without brutality. There is no sadism or brutality here, although more is implied than is actually contained. The lot in the recent, rougher, Spillane-era thrillers. His world is so much like Fritz Lang's that the characters are evil, detestable, but fascinating; even while they are demonstrating that all the characters are evil. They have a certain unimitable cameraderie, but they are more honest than Lang's criminals; petty vengeance and greed are their principal motivating factors. And unlike Lang's crooks, they win out in the end. The law is not an obstacle; there is not even a color; the man to his tools, to his tools.

Dashiell Hammett had his equivalent in T. Henry Gordon ("Scarface") and Thomas Jackson ("Little Caesar") in other early 30's gangster films, but there is no such climax here, and the murders go quite unpunished; the gang continues operations profitably at the fadeout, and while the hero has reformed, he is able to go "legit" with a healthy bankroll earned from bootlegging.

Like so many of the early gangster films, it is extremely measured and somewhat slow-moving, although a rip-roaring melodramatic climax adds a dash of exciting physical action. The stress on chase and battle (the actionful "Scarface" excepted) didn't come until later, when, in films like "G Men".
the emphasis shifted from law-breaker to law-enforcer. Because the first gangster films so quickly established clichés that have been parodied over since, "City Streets" does tend to seem amusingly dated in odd spots, through no fault of its own. The Rockette-like precision with which all the hoods reach for their shoulder holsters at given moments of crisis is an example. And unintentionally funny too is the giant-sized manhole, dressed up by an art-director to accommodate the machine guns that are thrown into it at one point; a death trap if there ever was one, it seems quite capable of swallowing up dogs, babies and perhaps even stunted adults. But the pleasing elements far transcend the dated qualities, and they are by no means limited to the stylised pictorial approach of Mamoulian's. It's a handsome production throughout, and the night-club set in particular is most impressive. The plot itself holds interest with such enjoyable gimmicks as the cigar-ash alibi. (Later, in actuality, a killer tried to utilise it -- unsuccessfully!) The characters are well written, and it's quite a shock to see Guy Kibbee playing for real the kind of lecherous villain that he later played for laughs in a dozen Warner musicals and comedies. Finally the complete lack of background music until the finale adds its own kind of austerity that pays off rather well. "City Streets" may not be absolutely top-grade Mamoulian -- but it's still high-grade movie-making by any standards, and especially those of 1931.

Next Program:

Friday of this week: 7.30 p.m. Two late Universal silents

"SHAKEDOWN" - 1929 - a boxing melodrama, directed by William Wyler; a rare print from one of the director's most interesting periods. With James Murray, Barbara Kent, Wheeler Oakman. 6 reels

"THE GIRL ON THE BARGE" - 1929 - a charming and exciting "off-beat" little film with a fine spectacle climax; directed by Edward Sloman from a Rupert Hughes story; with Jean Hersholt, Sally O'Neil.

Next Tuesday: 7.30 p.m. Program 2 in the Mamoulian cycle;

"LOVE ME TONIGHT" (1932) with Maurice Chevalier, Jeanette MacDonald, Myrna Loy, Charlie Ruggles, C. Aubrey Smith.
And excerpts from "Golden Boy" etc.

MARCH 13th

As of our last mailing, we were uncertain of the film or films that would be shown with Abel Gance's silent "AUCHE. We can now advise that the main film of the evening will be Von Sternberg's THE SCARLET EXPRESS, most eye-popping of all the Dietrich opus, with John Lodge, Louise Dresser, Sam Jaffe, C. Aubrey Smith.

A ROUBEN MANOULIAN INDEX

As we announced in our last News Bulletin, the Society plans to issue a Rouben Mamoulian Index in the near future. We had planned (or hoped!) to have it ready for this week, but pressure of work has prevented it -- also the fact that we're lending a hand with the Robert Rossen cycle at the New Yorker, and bringing out a brochure for that too. But the Index is in work, and all being well will be available at the third of our Mamoulian shows; if not, then shortly thereafter.