Ford and Sturges: Two Off-Beat Comedies

"THE WHOLE TOWN'S TALKING" (Columbia, 1935) Directed by John Ford
Producer: Lester Cowan; Photographed by Joseph August; screenplay by John Swerling and Robert Riskin from a story by W.R. Burnett; U.S. premiere: Radio City Music Hall; European title: "Passport to Fame". Running time: 95 minutes.

Although by 1935 John Ford, already a director for almost twenty years, had certainly evolved a personal style, it wasn't yet readily apparent in every picture. From "The Informer" on, there was never any mistaking a John Ford production -- if the camerawork didn't give it away, the music would - but oddly, just prior to that film, Ford made a number of well varied films which really have no personal imprint at all. "Flesh" for MGM, and "Air Mail" for Universal, were such films -- and so is "The Whole Town's Talking". All could equally well have been made by William Wellman or Mervyn LeRoy. But "The Whole Town's Talking" is certainly the least of such Ford films; it already tips its hand a little by the number of Ford "reliables" in the cast. That same year came "The Informer" and "Steamboat Round the Bend", the next year "The Prisoner of Shark Island". From here on in there would be no doubt.

"The Whole Town's Talking" is an extremely good film; efficiently made, looking more expensive than it is, well cast, and unusually well handled in its action and crowd scenes. However, it comes off better as a film than as a comedy; by virtue of its story and players, it always holds attention, but somehow one always has the feeling that the approach isn't quite right, and that in different hands it could have been much, much funnier -- the hands of a Milestone or a Wellman especially. Comedy has never been a really strong forte of Ford's; his roughneck humour has often weakened his westerns and service pictures, and his relatively few straight comedies (the delightful and hardly typical "Steamboat Round the Bend" excepted) are among his most easily forgotten works. W.R. Burnett and Robinson -- the old "Little Caesar" team -- seem just a little too much for Ford, even though Robinson had shown in "Little Giant" and others that he could be a first-rate comedian in a limited way. In any event, despite a Sturges-like chaos and stress on speed and noise, the story itself seems to take prominence over its own comic possibilities. And much of the lighting and camerawork is also so much in the accepted gangster cycle mould that the balance is further shifted. Establishing Robinson as a cold-blooded murderer in one scene where he kills a squealer was probably thought necessary in order to lose audience sympathy for him prior to his own sticky end; but up to that point he has been quite a likeable rogue, and the change is disturbing. Bogart in "It All Came True" managed to remain warm and human despite being established as a killer; here it doesn't work as well.

However, these criticisms are easy enough to make in retrospect, when we have become more familiar with Ford's work, and when too we have had more opportunity to see the best of the cynical satires of the 30's. In 1935, when the gangster cycle was still in full swing, story values counted for more than satirical ones. And too, the film had the dual-role gimmick to give it novelty. The idea wasn't exactly new then, but it wasn't commonplace either, and the trick photography -- and the idea of casting
Robinson as both a meek clerk and a vicious gangster — were elements of originality which inevitably don’t seem quite as fresh today. The trick photography itself, no longer a novelty either, nevertheless holds up extremely well and is far more adept than many a later film using the dual role motif. In ’35 the film was a solid, if not spectacular, boxoffice success, especially in Europe. (Curiously, in France, some reviews credit Walter Lang!) More than one critic at the time commented on the occasional lack of cohesion in the story, and suggested that the film might have been quite substantially cut prior to release. Certainly the casual way we are asked to accept Robinson’s apparently hopeless infatuation with Jean Arthur, and the skimpy appearance of the aunt (after a lot of talk about her) seem to suggest that a lot of footage was shot, and not used. But our print is certainly complete, and corresponds exactly to the 1935 release length.

Slightly disappointing as a comedy, and not at all what one expects from Ford, "The Whole Town’s Talking" is a strange but rather fascinating work, and on the whole stands up rather better than many of the comedies on gangster themes of that same period — e.g., Tay Garnett’s "She Couldn’t Take It". (How well, I wonder, does Ford’s earlier "Up the River" stand up today — and how soon will we have a chance to find out?!) Most of the big prison scenes are of course stock footage from Howard Hawks’ "The Criminal Code".

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**Intermission**

"THE LADY EVE" (Paramount, 1941) Direction and screenplay: Preston Sturges. Produced by Paul Jones; from a story by Monckton Hoffe; art direction by Hans Deder and Ernst Fegte; photographed by Victor Milner; edited by Stuart Gilmore; Running Time: 97 mins.


Not seen in many years, and held off both the theatrical and tv markets because of the remake ("The Birds and the Bees" with George Gobel), "The Lady Eve" re-emerges as fresh and delightful as ever, and perhaps even funnier than hitherto since American mores and morals seem far more in need of deflating today than they did in the forties.

One of the delights of re-seeing the Preston Sturges films is that no two of them are really alike. There are certain common denominators of course, but the approach is never quite as pre-determined as it used to be with Lubitsch. Not that we have any complaints about the enjoyable "sameness" of so many earlier Lubitsch films, but there was an added vitality to the Sturges films by virtue of their very unpredictability. One never knows whether they are to be gentle or violent, satirical or cynical, and even after they are well under way their mood is subject to change without notice. Some, like "The Palm Beach Story", are essentially "audience" films, where the fun somehow multiplies ten-fold when a large audience can help the comedy build. Seen cold, and without any audience — even knowing how good it is — "The Palm Beach Story" tends to disappoint. "The Lady Eve" on the other hand, relying less on slapstick and more on civilised cynicism and the throwaway line, requires no audience help at all. With an audience of one, or a thousand, it remains one of Sturges' most diverting comedies.

"The Lady Eve" deliberately adopts fluctuating moods and tempos. Its first half is slow, measured, its biggest laughs coming from the throwaway line, the characterisations, the gag of outrage. At the mid-way point it suddenly
becomes sentimental, in the cliché manner of so many romantic comedies of misunderstanding. But as in "Nothing sacred", this is no cliché, but merely a spoof of such cliché, and a jumping off-point for something else. The second half of the film is less subtle, more slapstick, more hard-hitting in its lampoons of everything from the importance (to Americans) of British nobility, and the importance (to New England Americans) of virginity. But if it's a trifle less subtle, it is if anything, funnier, winding up with a marvellous nightmare wedding night sequence. (Some future Kinsey survey might draw interesting conclusions from a comparison of this sequence with the uninhibited "Honeymoon Hotel" number from "Footlight Parade").

As in "The Palm Beach Story", the musical treatment is often as satirical as the script. "Tannhauser" is brought into play later on, but for most of the earlier and partially bogus love scenes, the old "Love Me Tonight" numbers -- "Isn't it Romantic?" and "Lover" again see effective service.

Once again, Sturges spins his Cinderella tale in a very unromanticised fashion. Here is no good poor girl, hoping for wealth, falling in love with an apparently poor man, and finding out - after she has renounced her mercenary ways - that he is a millionaire after all. The girl is corrupt, announces her intentions openly - and the millionaire is frankly a jerk, who deserves to be taken, and is. Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda, too often unsuccessfully type-cast in comedies, are here perfectly type cast and play up magnificently. It's a step forward from Lubitsch's "Trouble in Paradise". There the lovers were also corrupt, but we were glad to see them triumph because of their personal charm and cleverness. Here it's a triumph of the crooked and the mediocres in a milieu of corruption and sham, and we're glad to see such a triumph because usually such success, under such circumstances, falls to the wrong people. At least the couple here are nice people, and it's easier to identify with them than with the Cinderellas and Prince Charmings, because most of us are pretty unvuituous and talentless too, but, given the same opportunities, at least stand a chance of winding up on top of the heap in the same way.

Few Sturges films have had such a parade of interestingly written characters. Henry Fonda's dull millionaire (writing a check for $32,000 in a bored fashion, glad to get out of the game "before I lose any real money") is an obvious forerunner of Rudy Vallee in "The Palm Beach Story", though less acidly etched and not used as the butt for so many of Sturges' personal barbs. Charles Coburn, frequently cast as the social phoney and/or the card sharp, here does both - and has never done better. Most of the choice one-line gags fall his way, and he has one magnificent line which is the talkie equivalent of Griffith's great title from "Intolerance" ("Women who cease to attract men often turn to reform as a second choice") when he says "The trouble with people who reform is that they want to rain on everybody else's parade too!" But I've no wish to spoil the delight of the film by quoting more of these lines - and there are at least four block-busters per reel!

Directorially, the film has some extremely interesting elements. Sturges shows a penchant here for long scenes played entirely in close two-shots -- as in the hilarious mock seduction scene near the beginning. And the slapstick is curiously off-hand - violent, but often unexpected, and so sharp and brief, that it's sometimes over almost before you're conscious of it. In any event, "The Lady Eve" holds up beautifully, and it's pleasing to be reassured that Sturges is every bit as good as we thought he was back in the forties -- and indeed, a good deal better. -- William K. Everson

Next Program - Tuesday next - MARRIED (1925) with Constance Bennett and Owen Moore; HIS DAY OUT (1917) with Billy West, Oliver Hardy, Leatrice Joy; THE WIDOWER, a lovely French one-reeler of 1912, and a collection of Edison-Biograph-Vitagraph nostalgia from 1900-1905.