

Norman Taurog and "Americana"

Norman Taurog, who had made some of the snappier two-reel comedies of the mid and late twenties, found himself in a new niche in early 1931 with the release of "Skippy". Not wholly successful, it was nevertheless a moving and sensitive film (we showed it a few months ago) and its boxoffice performance was remarkable. For some time thereafter, Taurog found himself handed the bulk of Paramount properties revolving around children, or "Americana" themes, or both. None quite lived up to the qualities of "Skippy", but all, in varying degrees, were interesting. Tonight's program offers two of these post-"Skippy" essays by Taurog.

HUCKLEBERRY FINN (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Norman Taurog; scenario by Grover Jones and William Slavens McNutt from the story by Mark Twain; photographed by David Abel. 8 reels.

With Junior Durkin, Jackie Coogan, Mitzi Green, Jackie Searle, Clarence Muse, Glara Blandick, Jane Darwell, Eugene Pallette, Oscar Apfel, Warner Richmond, Charlotte Henry, Doris Short, Lillian Harmer, Cecil Weston, Guy Oliver, Aileen Manning, Frank McGlynn, Edward LeSaint.

Although "Huckleberry Finn" is often quite charming in its photography, and pleasing - if not too surprising - in its type-casting, it never quite comes off as anything more than an enjoyable programmer, sure-fire for the youngsters, but not too important otherwise. Its slight story-line and casual development make it look like a film that was perhaps the eighth or ninth in a long-running and now slightly tired series -- which it certainly wasn't. It starts off promisingly enough, but two thirds of the way through, when the confidence men get into the plot, it tends to stop developing and runs its course to an ending rather than a climax. No film version of "Huckleberry Finn" has ever been really successful. It was a rugged, grim and far from juvenile book -- quite the opposite of "Tom Sawyer" -- but movie versions have generally played up the obvious (the villainy of the father), turned the confidence men into semi-comic buffoons, and side-stepped or played down some of the meatier dramatic elements - such as the predicament of the runaway slave. Probably now no really faithful version of Twain's original will ever be made, which is a great pity. However, despite its shortcomings (and they are largely kept to the later portions of the film), this little film is rather enjoyable, thanks to its photography and its players. Finn, always a tough role to cast well, is done well by Junior Durkin. Jackie Coogan as Tom Sawyer doesn't get too many opportunities, and the role as written is a far cry from the traditional Tom. The supporting players come off best -- especially Warner Richmond and Oscar Apfel, and pretty Charlotte Henry.

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MRS WIGGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH (Paramount, 1934) Directed by Norman Taurog; produced by Douglas MacLean; screenplay by William Slavens McNutt and Jane Storm; from the story by Alice Hegan Rice and Anne Crawford Flexner; photographed by Charles Lang. 8 reels.

With Pauline Lord, W.C. Fields, Zasu Pitts, Evelyn Venable, Kent Taylor, Charles Middleton, Donald Meek, Jimmy Butler, George Breakston, Edith Fellowes, Carmencita Johnson, Virginia Weidler, George Reed, Mildred Gover, Arthur Housman, Walter Walker, Sam Flint, James Robinson, Dell Henderson.

To my knowledge, there have been just three versions of this minor classic of rural semi-comic tear-jerking. The last, in the early 40's, was a lugubrious and poorly-done version starring Fay Bainter -- who bears a rather striking resemblance to Pauline Lord, the Mrs Wiggs of 1934. Without

having seen it, we can probably assume that the first (1919) version was the best. That, after all, was the period of "True Heart Susie", "The Romance of Happy Valley" and "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" -- the period when this kind of fare was being done best because it was also being done so effortlessly. Well done as this 1934 version is, one does occasionally feel the straining for effect. One is conscious of the attempt to recreate a period; in the pre-1920 films, one always felt that it was the period.

However, "Mrs Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch" is a far better and certainly far more satisfying film than "Huckleberry Finn". Its sentiment is honest and unforced, its charm never coy. The little details -- the pulling of the wishbone, the cracking of the nuts under the rocking chair -- are inserted pleasantly, and the staging of the old vaudeville show (complete with a dance that seems to be based on Annabelle's Serpentine Dance) seems authentic without being deliberately quaint. Some little touches remind one not a little of Griffith; indeed, the use of the socks as gloves, so that theatre-going decorum may be maintained, is a pleasant advance on Mary Pickford's using one glove for two in "The New York Hat". Above all, the sets, streets and backgrounds are completely successful in their suggestion of a rural America in the now-too-distant past. And the cast offers the kind of people who just can't go wrong in this kind of thing. Virginia Weidler, as always, is wonderful; Kent Taylor and Evelyn Venable again make a likeable pair of young lovers, and Charles Middleton is still the perfect town skinflint.

About Pauline Lord, one tends to have reservations. She certainly avoids the unctious, predictable sentimentality that Fay Bainter brought to the role. But somehow in her underplaying, in her mannered use of her voice, and in her too self-effacing gentleness, there is a quality of artificiality that seeps through and becomes annoying. One just doesn't have too much sympathy for this Mrs Wiggs; one feels that the townspeople are good to her only because of her likeable brood of children, and if it weren't for them, one would almost enjoy seeing Charles Middleton get the best of her. Somehow she comes across as a rather senile old Pollyanna, whose Glad Game has gone sour without her being aware of it. Luckily, just as her nobility becomes a little tough to take, in bumbles W.C. Fields, exhibiting cheapness in his first scene, immediately becoming ensnared in some barbed wire, and deliberately wrecking a little boy's kite! It's a wonderful burst of vitality, if somewhat alien to the prevailing mood, and it's a pity that it's well into the second half before Mr. Fields makes his arrival. He becomes absorbed into the story as effectively as was his Micawber in "David Copperfield", and his role isn't overdone to a point where the balance is upset. Today of course we're inclined to say "Forget the balance -- let's have more Fields!" and to Fields fanciers, his late appearance may be disappointing. But he is in marvellous form during the closing three reels of the picture, and next month we'll have him back in all his starring glory with "The Old Fashioned Way" -- as the head of an acting troupe performing "The Drunkard"!

----- Wm. K. Everson -----

NEXT PROGRAMS

In all probability, our next program will be on Tuesday Oct. 16th., and will be a comedy show headed by Fields' THE OLD FASHIONED WAY, Laurel & Hardy's ANOTHER FINE MESS, and some silent Roach and Sennett comedies. I hope to get the October mailing out before I leave for California next week; but if the programs cannot be finalised then, there will be no mailing until I get back on October 15th. In that event, our first October show would be on the 23rd. We have some good items lined up, and I hope to bring back more from the coast too, so October and November should be exciting months -- especially with the MMA's Swedish cycle under way too.