"Professor Beware" (Harold Lloyd-Paramount, 1938)

Produced by Harold Lloyd; directed by Elliott Nugent; story by Francis M. Cockrell, Marion Cockrell, Crampton Harris, Jack Cunningham, Clyde Bruckman; screenplay by Delmer Daves; photographed by Archie Stout; edited by Duncan Mansfield; 9 reels.


The last of Harold Lloyd's own productions starring himself (he was subsequently to produce a Lucille Ball comedy, and to star, some ten years later, in "Mad Wednesday"), "Professor Beware", one almost expects it to be rather a disappointment, to provide the relative failure that would decide success-conscious Harold Lloyd to retire from the screen.

And initially, after an opening that seems to suggest a lampoon of Karl Freund's "The Mummy", the film seems to live up to those expectations. Harold Lloyd is appropriately in character, but seems to be floundering in a script that never knows what to do with him. The six writers seem to get in each other's way, setting up plot situations, trying out comic approaches that never quite work out. Then, at the beginning of reel four, one gets the impression that Lloyd just swept out all the writers, settled down with his old gagman Clyde Bruckman to work out routines, and concentrated solely on the laughs. For from that point on, we're back to the Lloyd of old -- sight gags, pantomime, gags of outrage, speed, slapstick, violence. One situation follows another with such speed that we're forever expecting this to be the climax, and then discovering to our pleasure that there is more to come. There's a semblance of plot in this last half of the film -- much of it seems to echo the general premise of his earlier "Grandma's Boy" -- but it never gets in the way of the laughs. It's a pity that the earlier sequences couldn't have been pruned drastically, but even though they're laboried, they still offer so many grand old faces that it's hardly an effort to sit back and enjoy them. For 1938, the calibre of the slapstick is high grade indeed, and it is hard to understand why the genre was dying then -- why Laurel and Hardy, after "blockheads", split up (as it happened, not permanently, although it was their last really worthwhile film) -- why talk and sophistication were considered so much superior to this kind of thing.

(Many of the late 20's sophisticated comedies by McCarey and others have now dated badly; only Preston Sturges from the 40's still retains his initial freshness). Whatever the reasons, sight comedy virtually died with this film and "blockheads" (one can hardly consider Fields a "sight" comic in the same way) and thus "Professor Beware" becomes something of a landmark as well as a highly enjoyable frolic.

Apart from the slow pacing in the earlier portions, the flaws are mainly mechanical ones. The back projection is just too obvious today, and the studio "exteriors" patently unconvincing. However, the back projection does offer some wonderfully nostalgic footage of Times Square, and the studio-shooting brings about one truly marvellous glass-shot -- the intricate and utterly convincing long high shot of the New York street, with the Brooklyn bridge in the background.

Harold Lloyd's pep and innate charm work as well as they did in the 20's, and one just can't go wrong with old pros like Lionel Stander and Raymond
Walburn. But, once they get under way, its the slapstick gags that dominate the screen. Some of them are repeats -- Lloyd used the car-in-the-tent routine back in the 20's in "Get Out and Get Under" -- and some were themselves to be repeated later. The entire slapstick chase climax was repeated verbatim in a Joan Davis "B" for Universal, "She Gets Her Man" -- a coincidence perhaps that that was also scripted by Clyde Bruckman! But if Clyde in his later, leaner years, borrowed a little from this Lloyd film, perhaps it is only poetic justice. The climactic wrap-up gag of "Professor Beware" itself seems to have been inspired by the bizarre shock-gag ending of Keaton's "College".

--- Intermission ---

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Josef von Sternberg
Scenario by von Sternberg and Samuel Hoffenstein;
photographed by Lee Garmes; from the novel by Theodore Dreiser; 9 reels


Note: Both the BFI Josef von Sternberg Index (by Curtis Harrington), The Film Daily Year Book (and sundry other sources too) all incorrectly list Bodil Rosing for the role actually played by Lucille LaVerne.

This least familiar and most elusive of all the von Sternberg Paramounts (it was made between "dishonored" and "Shanghai Express") turns out to be a surprisingly powerful and satisfying piece of work. I say "surprisingly" because through the years it has been consistently maligned as being sub-Sternberg, a travesty on the original, and little more than a cheap melodrama. Sternberg added a little fuel to the fire himself by going on record as being opposed to Dreiser's social theories, and saying that he intentionally shifted the emphasis of the story. Dreiser sued Paramount for distortion and unfaithfulness to the original. The film was attacked critically, and was not a success commercially. In Britain, it was not even released.

Now admittedly it is not top Sternberg. It offers little opportunity for the exotic and bizarre style in which he excelled -- and wisely, he did not try to create those opportunities in an unsuitable milieu. Dramatically it is sometimes a little flat, due perhaps to Sternberg's own lack of personal enthusiasm for the theme, but most probably due to the inept performance of Phillips Holmes, of which more in a moment. But undoubtedly the crux of the cause-célébre was the fact that Eisenstein had been engaged to make the film for Paramount, wrote a script, and then was removed from the project. To entrust the film to a "commercial" (in the sense that his films were successful at the boxoffice) director, and a studio contract director into the bargain, was asking for a filmic tempest. Automatically (and disregarding the question of whether Eisenstein's treatment was good, a masterpiece, or absurd), it became a thwarted and permanently ruined masterpiece. Vidor, Griffith, Milestone, Lubitsch -- anybody could have been handed the film, and the reaction would have been the same. The leftist writers (and film criticism was infected with politically biased writing far more then than now) had a field-day -- and their echoes are heard to this day. Curiously, Eisenstein also did some preparatory work on "Sutter's Gold", which was ultimately directed by James Cruze. But because it offered less potential for political hay-making, it was left alone. Like Sternberg's "An American Tragedy", it didn't quite come off -- but no-one undertook the same kind of anti-Hollywood crusade on its behalf.
Despite Sternberg's avowed disapproval of Dreiser's thesis, his treatment does not seem to differ markedly from George Stevens in "A Place in the Sun". If anything it is starker, and thus probably closer to the spirit if not the letter of Dreiser's original. Stevens made far more of Clyde Griffith's fringeness with his wealthy relatives; Sternberg makes the point quicker, and gets to the heart of the matter faster. Stevens' production is lush too, and stresses the tragic romance far more; with a star like Elizabeth Taylor he could hardly write her out of the picture, and thus her tragedy was stressed almost as was that of Griffiths, played by Montgomery Clift. But Sternberg isn't telling a love story; she is removed from the story at the mid-way point and does not reappear.

How much, if any, of Eisenstein's original script influenced von Sternberg is of course a matter of pure conjecture. The fast, staccato pacing in the earlier portions of the film, the skipping from incident to incident almost in a montage fashion, is an unfamiliar element in Sternberg's work. But it may have come as much from necessity as anything else, so even though it suggests Eisenstein, we can hardly be sure. The recurring use of water as a back-round to titles suggests Eisenstein; yet the frequent (and often unnecessary) utilisation of establishing titles is a Sternberg trait, and since these two elements are blended together, any conclusions would be pure guess-work. Stevens himself dismissed Eisenstein's script as being absurd and unfilmable; to his knowledge, he made no concrete observations on Sternberg's film, although he seems to have borrowed from, and built on, quite a lot of it -- including of course those famous long slow dissolves which were a trademark of all Sternberg films then, but which, in "A Place in the Sun" suddenly caused a stir with the chi-chi. (For the record I am a great admirer of "A Place in the Sun", certainly one of the finest American films of the past 15 years).

Pictorially, "An American Tragedy" has a great deal of traditional Sternberg elegance, even if the "fireworks" are kept appropriately under control. A car crash scene near the beginning is beautifully done; so is an idyllic canoe scene, possibly borrowed from both "Bardeleby the Magnificent" (Vidor) and "White Shadows in the South Seas" (Van Dyke) -- but what matter? No director worth his salt minds borrowing -- and thus admitting that a previous director achieved an effect in a way that just can't be bettered. But when all is said and done, in a film of this type, the performances are of supreme importance -- the performances, and the casting -- and here is where the prime weaknesses appear. Frances Dee is lovely and gives a good performance, but she never quite manages that other-worldly, just-out-of-reach quality that Elizabeth Taylor achieved so effortlessly. There just isn't sufficient contrast between her and Sylvia Sidney, who is likewise effective and appealing, but frankly so appealing that she never becomes the drudge and dead-end trap that the character really is. There is no reason for Clyde Griffiths to feel so victimised in his association with her. Which brings us to Griffiths himself, the key role, and a role so well played by Montgomery Clift in the days when he was still acting. Phillips Holmes, physically and facially the right sensitive type, just seems to have no comprehension of the meaning of his role at all. He is so completely selfish and petulant that one hardly feels a pang of sympathy for him; and one senses Sternberg's frustration at his inadequacy. Note how, in the key scene in the boat, Holmes is totally unable to convey the right emotions -- or any emotions -- and how Sternberg is forced to cut around him by playing the scene largely in closeups of Sidney's face. Luckily, in the second -- and very tense -- half of the film, his role is a passive one. Middleton and Fichel take over as a wonderful pair of opposing attorneys; for all of its concentration on talk and one set, this trial scene is powerful, dynamic stuff.

We've left until last a mention of the lovely, supremely moving performance by Lucille LaVerne as Griffiths' mother. The harridan of "Orphans of the Storm" gives such a poignant cameo performance (so much superior to Ann Revere's) that the climax takes on real greatness. --Wke--