The 30's: Two new "American Sweethearts"

"HONEY" (Paramount, 1930) Directed by Wesley Ruggles; screenplay by Herman J. Mankiewicz from "Come out of the Kitchen" by Alice Duer Miller and A.E. Thomas; photographed by Henry Gerrard; 7 reels

With: Nancy Carroll, Stanley Smith, Skeets Gallagher, Lillian Roth, Harry Green, Mitzi Green, Zasu Pitts, Jobyna Howland, Charles Sellan

With Betty Bronson's star long on the wane, and Janet Gaynor never quite matching the impact of her work in "Seventh Heaven", Nancy Carroll loomed large in 1930 as the logical successor to Mary Pickford's "America's Sweetheart" title. And if posterity - and film historians - haven't smiled on Nancy quite as they smiled on Mary (and later, Shirley Temple) it is largely for the purely mechanical reasons that the best of Nancy Carroll's films were made in the early thirties, and until recently they just haven't been available for re-evaluation.

In all fairness to Miss Carroll, "Honey", though of extreme academic and historical interest, is something of a museum piece and hardly does full justice to her unique appeal and vivacity. We saw rather more of the "genuine" Nancy Carroll last month when we showed "Paramount on Parade". But "Honey" is the kind of fragile, romantic whimsey that nobody knew how to make properly in 1929 and 1930. We had charm in films then, sophistication in large doses from Mr. Lubitsch, but this kind of thin-spun froth, so much a product of the silent screen, just hadn't found its feet yet in talkies. (I expect a dozen outraged repudiations of that statement, so let me amend it to say that I at least can't recall any successful romantic whimsies from that period). "Honey" is a better movie than many of its year (it is a 1929 production, released early in 1930), but it has most of the faults common to the period. It is awkwardly paced, and dialogue prolonged almost for its own sake. The editing is often clumsy, and the big Negro spiritual sequence - the famous "Sing You Sinners" episode - while still a highlight of the production, is somehow untidy and undisciplined. Yet, providing one doesn't set one's sights too high, it is an enjoyable little film.

Some of the dialogue has an unexpected sparkle, with most of the good lines going to Zasu Pitts; Lillian Roth is most appealing, and the "Let's Be Domestic" number is a delight. And even if she isn't seen at her very best, Nancy Carroll is still a sheer delight to watch, and to listen to.

Paramount, who seemed to have a monopoly on Alice Duer Miller properties in the 20's (and made the most of it) had filmed this before, under its original title, in 1919. Marguerite Clark starred, and John Robertson directed. In 1931, Paramount also put out two foreign versions. The French, "Cherie", gave prominence to Marguerite Moreno in the Jobyna Howland role, and the German one, titled "Jede Frau hat Ewas" starred T. Berliner and Karol Vesperman

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Intermission

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"NOW AND FOREVER" (Paramount, 1934) Directed by Henry Hathaway; from an original story "Honor Bright" by Jack Kirkland and Melville Baker; screenplay by Vincent Lawrence and Sylvia Thalberg; photographed by Harry Fischbeck; 8 reels


Ironically, while the fondly-remembered "Honey" turns out to be a disappointment as a Nancy Carroll showcase, the overlooked and forgotten "Now and Forever"
now reveals itself as a near-perfect vehicle for the budding genius of a young Shirley Temple, herself then on the threshold of becoming the new "America's Sweetheart." "Little Miss Marker" seems to have acquired a near-legendary reputation as "the" definitive early Temple vehicle. Looking at it recently however, it seemed to me to be contrived, predictable and rather dull, with a clever but rather mechanical performance from Temple. As with Rin Tin Tin in his first vehicles, Shirley was all too clearly following signals and directions. But here she at least gives the impression of fully understanding her role, and goes through an incredible display of A to Z virtuosity. There's little cuteness for its own sake, and even Shirley's one big song number - "The World Owes Me a Living" (which Disney used at the same period in "The Grasshopper and the Ants") - is played down, and even interrupted, for plot dramatics. Shirley's emotional and "sad" scenes are so well played (and directed) that they're almost a little hard to take, and she wraps up the whole film so effortlessly (and ruthlessly?) that only dear old Sir Guy Standing has any chance of holding his own. Cooper and Lombard, when playing scenes away from Temple, sometimes seem almost lost, as if they've given in to the futility of trying to stand their ground against such an inhumanly able co-star.

The players apart, "Now and Forever" is a curious kind of picture -- a sort of post-code "Hold Your Man" or "No Man of Her Own", with the familiar duo of the thirties -- the con-man and his mistress -- dumped into rather unfamilar surroundings. Basically it's a child-star vehicle, handled in adult terms, with rather unexpected shifts of emphasis. Perhaps in a way, it's too "big" a production. The sets are often huge, the pacing a trifle slow at times for this kind of thing, the script a shade too involved. It all seems more related to the Hathaway of "Peter Ibbetson", or the Cooper of "Desire" in its visual scope than to the Temple of "Stowaway". At times one almost wishes it were a cheaper picture, so that it could offer all the expected cliches without apologising for them. The ending is quite poignant and not altogether satisfying; one feels like saying "Be damned to maturity, or pretensions to maturity; let's have an all-out rose-hued happy ending with no nonsense about it!" "Now and Forever", like so many films made by contract stars and contract directors in the thirties, has too much formula to be a really important film; yet also has so much talent behind it, and enough deviation from formula, that it rises well above normal programmer standards. You'll either wish it was a whole lot better -- or a whole lot worse. Since we can't change it at this stage however, all we can do is sit back and admire the slickness, enjoy the old friends in the cast, and most of all marvel at Shirley Temple's quite brilliant little performance -- which, despite later acquired techniques, remains I think one of her very best.

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NEXT TUESDAY - March 19 - SCARFACE (Howard Hawks, 1932) with Muni, Raft, Karloff; HOOSEGOW (1929) with Laurel & Hardy; and one other short to be added.

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As most of you know from the last News Bulletin, I made a rather sudden departure for Hollywood in late February. The last two weeks have been spent screening -- and screening -- and screening -- at Paramount; and checking one or two of the other Hollywood vaults. I now have a very complete picture of the kind of silent material that has been preserved -- and the kind that is no more. This is the kind of information that is of great interest to a few, and of but minor interest to the rest -- so we'll devote no Huff Society screening time to a report. But there will be a detailed report at next Friday's Film Group meeting, when we'll also be showing EVE'S LEAVES which was squeezed out of last month's schedule because of the unexpected showing of PARAMOUNT ON PARADE.

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