The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Programmers from the 30's

As veterans of the Huff Society know, every so often we devote a program to films that are purely "entertainment", purely "commercial", and of no great value or importance artistically. We do this because even the programmers are a big part of film history, and outside of TV, which hardly counts, it is becoming increasingly hard to see this kind of fare. On their own levels, these films need no apologies; nor do they need carefully analytic notes to make them seem more important than they are. These preliminary, explanatory notes are mainly for the benefit of those newcomers or casual attendees who expect the important and the significant at any film society showing. If you do, you're either in for a pleasantly surprising surprise, or you'll find that you've latched on to the wrong film society!

BILLION DOLLAR SCANDAL (Paramount, 1932; released 1933) Directed by Harry Joe Brown; story and screenplay by Gene Towne & Graham Baker; dialogue, Willard Mack & Beatrice Banyard; photographed by Charles Stumer; 8 reels


It's difficult to know whether "Billion Dollar Scandal" was a potentially important film in the "Five Star Final" and "Front Page" tradition that went wrong, or an unambitious "3" that suddenly pulled itself together and made something out of itself. It doesn't quite fit into either category due to inconsistency of story-line and approach. It starts out in a bantering, Damon Runyon fashion that never quite works because Robert Armstrong's comic tough guy just doesn't ring true. Then for a while it seems to shift gears, as though wanting to join in the then popular gangster and newspaper cycle. And finally, in the last third, it makes it. The final episodes of the film, from the trial through to the sudden, underplayed and ironic ending, are suspenseful, exciting and often quite poignant. The last third is good enough to make one feel quite generous towards the rest of it. Not that it is ever dull, and with that cast of old veterans there's always someone interesting to watch, but in the earlier portions of the film one does often wonder just why it came to be made, and how it got past the script stage!

With a Cagney or a Lee Tracy or a Pat O'Brien in the lead (and they were good enough actors not to have been overly dominant in the role) it might have worked better; with some other director than Harry Joe Brown (an expert producer and director of above-average westerns, but ill at ease in drama) it might have been less confused; but even as it is, it is entertaining and, if nothing else, quite unpredictable. That fine actor Frank Morgan gets another chance to show how touching he could be when given the chance, and it's always a pleasure to watch lovely Constance Cummings. Edward Van Sloan, just through with trying to destroy the Frankenstein monster, Dracula and the Mummy, plays so delightfully in the same vein that one almost expects him to draw a crucifix from his pocket to thrust into Armstrong's face!

-INTERMISSION-
"STORM OVER THE ANDES" (Universal, 1935) Directed by Christy Cabanne; screenplay by Frank Wead, Al DeMond, Eva Greene; camera, Henry Forbes; 8 reels.

With Jack Holt, Antonio Moreno, Mona Barrie, Gene Lockhart, Grant Withers, Barry Norton, George Lewis, Juanita Garfias, Alma Real, Lucio Villegas, Gino Corrado.

"Storm Over the Andes" is frankly a "B" picture all dressed-up with running time, very fancy main titles, good sets and nice production values so that it can pass acceptably as an "A". Unfortunately, everything director Christy Cabanne ever did -- from 1914's "Pathways of Life" to 1940's "The Mummy's Hand" -- came out looking like a "B". However, here he gets a lot of help from cast and stock footage, and few of his films had a glossier look to them.

Basically the film is a re-working of John Ford's 1932 "Air Mail". The characters, the basic incidents and construction, even the irritatingly vague climax are all the same, although Ford's film certainly had more depth and tighter pacing.

Ford was dealing with air-mail pilots operating from a remote aerodrome surrounded on all sides by desert, mountains, high tension wires and fog! Antonio Moreno's airfield has most of these same hazards (one of the crashes is taken right out of "Air Mail" too!) and an additional one in that it is the centre of operations of a Bolivian war! Just which war is never made too clear, but it's not the half-hearted, lazy skirmishing type of war one expects from Latin America.

Universal bought up hundreds of feet of stock footage from "Hell's Angels", so when the enemy "rebels" take to the air, there are whole squadrons of "W" planes fighting over who gets to run Bolivia. Von Richthofen's Flying Circus is there in full regalia, although the enemy ace is now appropriately renamed "El Zorro". After the first big dog-fight sequence, one wonders what will come next -- and sure enough, one of the characters refers to a "big enemy ammunition dump", so we all know it's just a matter of time before that poor truck gets blown sky-high again.

But apart from the skill with which the stock footage is manipulated, "Storm Over the Andes" is a neat little film of its kind. There are some new flying scenes, a marvellously absurd parachute jump sequence, and the usual collection of stock characters -- missing only the cowardly ex-pilot who has to redeem himself! All of the expected cliches materialise on cue (I think what I miss most of all from the new films are those good old cliches!), and the only serious criticism one can make is of the utterly unfunny comedy given to that utterly unnecessary character played by Gene Lockhart. It's not that there's an excess of comedy, but the couple of bits of humorous "relief" (especially a drunk scene at a party) are so deadly dull that, even though they're quite brief, the whole film seems slowed appallingly.

1935 was a busy year for Jack Holt; apart from his regular series of melodramas for Columbia, he made this one for Universal, and was with Shirley Temple in one of her best Fox vehicles, "The Littlest Rebel". It's good to see him again, neat little moustache, hair brushed back, jutting chin, the very epitomy of 100% reliability, world-wide adventurer, breezy lover, a modern musketeer with enough of the "what's in it for me?" philosophy to make him believable as well as likeable. Jack Holt, Richard Dix, Douglas Fairbanks .... those were the days! And today -- Lawrence Harvey, Tony Perkins, Pat Boone. To quote a memorable Oliver Hardy line, "It's enough to make a man bust out crying!"

NEXT SUNDAY MORNING -- New Yorker, 9.30 a.m. -- the concluding six episodes of THE HAUNTED HARBOUR.

Huff schedules for September/October will be in the mail late next week. We'll probably start early in September, as there are a lot of shows we have to work around next month. We want to avoid conflict with the NY Film Festival showings, and also with the best of the New Yorker's horror cycle of some 40 films.

Good news: the original 1932 MOST DANGEROUS GAME plays there Fri/Sat Sept 6/7.