

Next program; Tuesday next Oct. 22nd: Busby Berkeley's DAMES (1934) with Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler; plus musical excerpts from the 30's with Astaire-Rogers, Chevalier, Nancy Carroll, Jeanette MacDonald, Sonja Henie, etc.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

October 15 1963

MUSICALS OF THE THIRTIES: Program Two

COMPILATION (approx. 45 mins)

With this compilation of excerpts, we're not trying to be comprehensive and we admit to many gaps. But we think that, with next week's compilation, we'll be offering a representative cross-section of the various types of musicals of the thirties - good and bad, small and big, great and inane. Either way, nostalgia - if not art - should run rampant! This week's selection of excerpts will run in the following order:

"NEW DEAL RHYTHM" (1934) - Charles "Buddy" Rogers stars in this really odd little curio. Warners were notorious fawners after FDR, but Paramount were less partisan -- except on this occasion. It's a strange if interesting hymn of praise to the NRA, with Buddy singing, conducting, playing sundry instruments, and even handing a chorus or two to Marjorie Main! This film incidentally, is not an excerpt but a regular one-reeler -- and quite an elaborate one.

"WAKE UP AND LIVE" (1937) Few studios made less inspired musicals than Fox, and fewer musical stars were more wasted than Alice Faye. This is another one of those endless musicals of the mid-30's built around a radio station, with Joan Davis being unfunny and Jack Haley being dull. But Alice's warm charm seems to liven anything up, even including the rather routine songs in this little opus directed by Sidney Ianfield.

"SONS OF THE DESERT" (1933) One of the very best Laurel & Hardy features, this one, directed by William A. Seiter, included a delightful "Honolulu Baby" number so full of energetically bouncing cuties that the sequence was deleted from almost all of its tv runs. It also gibes at the Busby Berkeley technique a little, and offers a cruelly accurate lampoon of Dick Powell.

"POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL" (1936) While Alice Faye was treated rather shabbily when it came to good songs, Shirley Temple - whose films weren't really musicals - came off rather well. Most of her films had one or two really good, tuneful, songs. "Poor Little Rich Girl", which bore little resemblance to the original story or to the Mary Pickford silent version, was one of Temple's best and had a number of really first-rate songs. Here, Shirley at her most charming and beguiling, sings to her father (Michael Whalen) who runs a radio station or an ad agency or a soap company -- or maybe all three. Fox made so many radio musicals that after a while they stopped telling us who did what! Tony Martin (unbilled at the time) introduces Shirley's song. Dir: Irving Cummings

"THE MUSIC GOES ROUND" (1936) Harry Richman, back on Broadway recently, goes into a typically and harmlessly racist minstrel number which is probably carefully excised from all tv showings today! (Dir: Victor Schertzinger)

"GOING GAY" (1934, dir: Berthold Viertel) An innocuous little number from a minor British musical, typical of the Jack Buchanan-type ditty so popular on the London stage. Arthur Riscoe is the not too impressive male lead, and our main reason for showing it is that it gives us a rare (these days) glimpse of the sprightly and lovely Magda Schneider -- now remembered, if at all, only as the mother of Romy Schneider.

"MISSISSIPPI" (1935, dir: Edward Sutherland) A good number - and a good sequence - from the enjoyable Crosby-Fields film. Fred Kohler also figures rather prominently in these lively excerpts.

"FOOTLIGHT PARADE" (1933, dir: Lloyd Bacon; musical numbers by Busby Berkeley) The "By a Waterfall" number from "Footlight Parade" is the "Intolerance" of musical spectacles. Like "Intolerance", it's exhausting and a shade too long -- but also like "Intolerance", one is not only endlessly amazed by its virtuosity, but one is always spotting new faces (Jean Rogers, Joan Barclay etc.) among the chorines, and noticing little details that one missed before. For example, it wasn't until about the fifth viewing that I noticed that one of the mermaids gets completely confused at one of the most crucial moments, and turns right when she should have stayed where she was! It occurs on the left of the screen, near the climax of one of the snake-like gyrations. She recovers just in time, and hops back into place, barely interrupting the rhythm of the whole gigantic undertaking, and thus saving a costly, time-consuming and expensive routine from being re-shot! Whatever happened to her, I wonder? It would be nice to think that she went on to become Kim Novak or Rita Hayworth, but it's more likely that Berkeley had her

black-listed, or at the very least shipped off to white slavery in Buenos Aires. The principal participants in "By a Waterfall" are of course Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler, with James Cagney glimpsed briefly at the beginning as the genius responsible for it all. (It is worth noting that the original plot had Cagney devise the number, build the sets and train the chorus girls all in the space of one afternoon!)

----- I n t e r m i s s i o n -----

"HALLELUJAH I'M A BUM" (U.A., 1932; released 1933) Directed by Lewis Milestone
Story by Ben Hecht; songs by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart; musical direction, Alfred Newman; adapted by S.N. Behrman; Photographed by Lucien Andriot; art director, Richard Day. 9 reels.

With Al Jolson, Madge Evans, Harry Langdon, Frank Morgan, Chester Conklin, Tyler Brooke, Tammany Young, Edgar Connor, Bert Roach, Dorothea Wolbert, Louise Carver, Harold Goodwin, Burr McIntosh.

Next to Mamoulian's "Love Me Tonight" (which had many similarities, including a Rodgers and Hart score), "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" is one of the loveliest and most original of all the musicals of the thirties, and happily our print today is completely and thoroughly intact. When reissued in the forties to cash in on the revival of Jolson interest, it was cut down by over a reel (the casualties including some delightful songs) and retitled "Heart of New York". It wasn't exactly a hack job - the cutting was thoughtfully done - but it made it look as though the complete version was gone forever, since Mary Pickford now owns the property and there seems little chance of her letting it loose again. Thus it is not only a pleasure, but also a surprise, to run across this original-length version with nary a scene missing. We should qualify that a trifle perhaps - this is the original version of the British release, which tampered with it ever so slightly in altering some of the slang, not only in dialogue but also in songs which thus had to be shot twice. The principal change of course is in transforming "bum" into "tramp". In England in the 30's, "bum" though not in the top ten list of obscenities, was nevertheless considered an extreme vulgarity, and was colorful enough to be scrawled on toilet walls. By now it has almost fallen out of usage, vulgar or otherwise, and has become accepted in England as an American term of harmless proportions. (Nevertheless, when this film was reissued in England in the fifties, it was given yet another title - "Lazy Bones"). But apart from this change, and one or two others of like nature, there are no tamperings or temperings, and visually, if not orally, this print corresponds 100% to the original.

Jolson went on record as saying it was his worst film, and quite certainly it is his least typical. It is also quite probably his best, not least because his bombast is tamed to a remarkable degree. The dynamism is still there in the song numbers, and in the dramatic scenes, there's a poignancy which Al never achieved in other films where he never forgot that he was a showman first and an actor second.

There is so much to enjoy in the film that it's difficult to know where to begin. The music includes some of Rodgers and Hart's loveliest melodies, most notably "You Are Too Beautiful". Milestone's direction is stylish and powerful, sometimes a little visually reminiscent of Mamoulian, and of course with his inevitable rapid tracking shots. Frank Morgan's performance is one of his finest and most touching, and Madge Evans is cool, beautiful and appealing as his mistress. (Apart from a subtle suggestion of wedding bells in a musical motif towards the end, marriage never seems to raise its head, ugly or otherwise). Harry Langdon is fine in one of his most suitable roles since his tragic downfall and the supporting cast is full of fine cameos. It's a pity that more of the Central Park footage wasn't actually shot there -- only the suicide scene on the bridge seems authentic -- but this seems a small quibble. With its charm, its beauty, its sadness - and its filmic and musical imagination - "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" is surely one of those few films perennially beyond all criticism.

A minor comment that is a personal rather than an "official" interpretation. It seems to me that the film makes its strongest appeal to bachelors -- albeit entirely happy and contented ones. It's a fable ... a fairy-tale ... with Madge Evans as a kind of unattainable dream girl. Its emotional appeal is that of "the elegant melancholy of twilight", to quote a Chaplin line from "Limelight", and the dreamers and the wishful thinkers to whom a dream girl is at least a possibility if not a probability, will probably get the most from it. As a happy bachelor I remember being much moved by it; now as a happy non-bachelor, I'm still much moved -- but in a more detached way, as by the plight of Lennie in another Milestone film, "Of Mice and Men". The film's values haven't changed, but some of our values have ... and perhaps it's our loss.

----- William K. Everson -----