The Sound Films of H. St. Clair

Malcolm St. Clair - former Keystone cop, gag-writer, director of 2-reelers, director of Rin Tin Tin, and then suddenly hailed as a second Lubitsch - was one of the brightest and most inventive directors of the twenties. His films had charm and spark! they told their tales visually, with a minimum of titles. He made his films cheaply, shaving huge sums off the budgets; his films pleased both public and critics. In 1926, with a whole string of sophisticated and silken comedies behind him, American film critics voted him one of the top directors, with only Von Stroheim and Lubitsch ahead of him. His best films of this period -- "A Woman of the World" and "Are Parents People?" - and to a slightly lesser degree "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter" -- are delights still, not dated in the slightest.

What happened to St. Clair when sound came in? Lubitsch and D'Arrast made the transition without a break in their style (although it did D'Arrast no good, and his career mysteriously came to a halt). Another St. Clair confrère, Monta Bell ("The King on Main Street", etc.) seemed to lose his touch, but continued, actively, as an MGM producer, associated with some fairly big pictures. Herbert Brenon and James Cruze never regained the prestige of their silent days, but continued to make interesting films, and occasionally quite ambitious ones.

But St. Clair openly admitted that the sound medium confused him, and that he couldn't really be bothered to understand it. To him, film was a visual medium and nothing else. After a handful of routine talkies in the early 30's ("Montana Moon", "The Boudoir Diplomat" etc.) he apparently retired, and was written off as a has-been.

Then, in late 1936, Zanuck brought him back into harness again, and until his retirement in 1948 (he died in 1952) St. Clair was consistently active -- on "B" pictures. He specialised in melodrama -- and comedy, the latter involving Lumm and Abner, The Jones Family, Milton Berle and Laurel and Hardy. That the Laurel & Hardys were weak is hardly his fault; those that they made at Fox, denied the freedom and control they had with Roach, were all disappointing. It is some consolation that the ones that St. Clair made with them -- and especially "Jitterbugs" -- were the best and most amusing of a not very exciting group.

The interesting thing is that, on unimportant pictures - A minus and B plus affairs - St. Clair had suddenly learned to make his movies move again. They had charm. They had pep. They had subtle sight gags. It would be a mistake to regard these as either great or important films; but on the other hand it is unfair to ignore them, to continue to regard St. Clair as a has-been who was defeated by sound.

Tonight we're offering a cross-section of the last 12 years of St. Clair's film work, including his "come-back" film in 1936, and excerpts from one of his very last films. They are "B" films, and hardly the kind of films that turn up at film societies. Within their own limits, they are also very good little films. Those of you who admire the St. Clair of old will be pleased and surprised, I think, to find how much of his old flair he recaptured. You won't suddenly want to found a cult of St. Clair talkies -- but on the other hand, I don't think you'll be dismayed, as we so often are, at the last filmic flings of formerly great talents.
"BORN RECKLESS" (20th Century Fox, 1937) Directed by Mal St. Clair
Produced by Sol Wurtzel; cameras: Daniel B. Clark;
screenplay: John Patrick, Robert Ellis, Helen Logan, from
an original story by Jack Andrews; 7 reels
With Brian Donlevy, Rochelle Hudson, Barton MacLane, Robert Kent, Pauline
Moore, Harry Carey, Chick Chandler, William Pawley, Francis McDonald,
George Wolcott, Joseph Crehan, Emmet Vogan, Joyce Compton, Stanley

No remake of the earlier John Ford film of the same title, "Born Reckless"
is a fast-paced actioner of taxi wars. To it St. Clair brings all the
zip and pep and good humour of his old Sennett films. It moves at a
clacking pace, with new characters and fresh incidents popping up all
the time, and a sequence in which Donlevy deliberately wrecks a brand new
"super-taxi" is an especially delightful highlight. It's odd that
Fox, which made so many top-heavy, overlong and stodgy "A" features in this
period should turn out such slick and above-average program supports. One
often conjectures as to the wonders that might have been brought about had
the "B" directors like St. Clair suddenly been handed the plums that were
going to Henry King or Irving Cummings.

"Born Reckless" moves too fast for any of it to be taken seriously --
unlike, for example, the similar "B" films put out by the Pine-Thomas unit
for Paramount during the 40's. Pine-Thomas took all their cliches very
seriously, and not even the best of their films had the exuberant energy
and non-stop movement of this little work.

Here is one of those films where the good guys are undefeatable, and the
bad guys really show their corruption with every scowl and every utterance.
There's no waste motion here as Fox's entire contract list of hoodlums and
finks and strong-arm men go into action. What a pleasure the old "B" films
used to be, with their horses of familiar faces ... not like today, when
every supporting role has to be a hand-picked "characterisation" from some
overly-mannered performer like Joseph Wiseman, who has his eyes too firmly
fixed on that "Best Supporting Performance" Oscar to hold a candle to the
easy and assured playing of people like William Pawley or (specifically,
and remembering "Union Depot") David Landau.

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"ARTHUR TAKES OVER" (20th Century Fox, 1948) Directed by Mal St. Clair
Produced by Sol Wurtzel; with Skip Homier, Lois
Collier, Richard Crane, Jerome Cowan, Howard Freeman,
Ann Todd, William Bakewell. Two excerpts from a
7 reel film.

"Arthur Takes Over", a polished quickie that St. Clair made in 12 days,
came out in April of 1948 and was followed, in August, by St. Clair's
last film, "Fighting Back", a straight drama. In a way, one wishes - for
historical convenience - that "Arthur Takes Over" had been his last, for
it has so many echoes of "Are Parents People?" (1925) from his peak period.
Like that film, it is a fairly static story which lifts itself out of the
ordinary by its charm, its pleasing people, and its sight gags. True, it
does bog down into some rather long dialogue-dominated sequences, but these
are never dull, and are always enlivened by the unexpected sight gag. Some
of the best, unfortunately, don't appear in sequences that lend themselves
to the excerpt treatment. Like "Are Parents People?" it is a comedy of
misunderstandings in which the problems of adults are settled by youngsters,
and a mature, estranged couple are brought together again. In 1948, it
was a welcome oasis of charm and good comedy amid a singularly arid period of "B" pictures. Today it doesn't hold up quite as well as one would like; endless tv "family situation comedies" make much of it seem cliché now, and the immediate post-war sentiment (the returning serviceman) and the brash, emotional teenagers with their now horribly dated hip jargon, tend to make some of it seem a little stiff and forced. But its overall charm and interesting characters still work, especially William Bakewell as an obnoxious, knuckle-grinding smalltown big shot. All of his stuff is very funny indeed. Our excerpts are of some of this typical family by-play, and one wild slapstick ride through the streets of Hollywood.

St. Clair had also staged the Keystone Cop chase for Fox in "Hollywood Cavalcade", and although slapstick was not his forte, he showed there - and here - that he hadn't lost his Sennett touch. Incidentally, I'm probably wrong, considering his years, but it looks to me as though the lanky double for Jerome Cowan in this sequence is St. Clair himself.

"CRACK UP" (20th Century Fox, 1936) Directed by Mal St. Clair; produced by Samuel G. Engel; screenplay by Charles Kenyon & Sam Mintz from a story by John Goodrich; music & lyrics, Harry Akat and Sidney Clare; photographed by Barney McGill; 7 reels.


"Crack Up" was St. Clair's "comeback" film, and a nice, smooth, efficient job he makes of it. With a bigger budget, this interesting story could have served as a special along the lines of "Transatlantic", and is something that William K. Howard and James Wong Howe could really have gotten their teeth into! But as a "B", it is distinctly above-average, moves quickly after a slow start, and while taken more seriously than "Born Reckless", still has enough good old-time hoke to make it thoroughly enjoyable. Earlier, and prior to re-screening it, we were relying on memories of 27 years ago in likening it to Hitchcock's "Foreign Correspondent". Actually the resemblances are only superficial - both are espionage tales, and both have remarkably similar endings. But that is all. Otherwise, "Crack Up" is a good piece of spy hokum, with a little more depth than most of its kind, and a rattling good melodramatic roundup of all the loose ends in the closing reel. If it contains few surprises, the expected clichés are played for all they are worth, and all wrapped up with neat production values and good photography. (One might also mention the crisp camerawork on "Born Reckless" too; the work of Dan Clark, Mix's old cameraman). Again, the supporting cast brings out many old favorites; the "foreign power" is never named, but since William Von Brincken is one of its key agents, there presumably isn't too much doubt about it. During the war, von Brincken tactfully changed his name to William Vaughan -- but went right on playing crisply efficient Hunns!

If nothing else, and quite apart from its interest as lesser known Mal St. Clair work, tonight's program should be a real reminder (if one is needed) of what real skill went into the old "B" movies -- and what real entertainment values emerged. There are a dozen first runs playing within a spoiler's throw of us right now that don't have the production know-how and entertainment value of these two Malcolm St. Clair bread-and-butter features of almost thirty years ago.

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NEXT TUESDAY - a program of melodrama from the silents - "THE NIGHT CRY" (1925), one of the best Rin Tin Tin vehicles; "YANKEE CLIPPER" (DeMille-Rupert Julian, 1927) with William Boyd, Ellynor Fair, Walter Long; and "A TRANSPLANTED PRAIRIE FLOWER" (Edison, 1915) with Edward Earle, Gladys Hulette.

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