Two lesser-known films from two major directors


There are very few sound reasons why certain early films in important directors' careers remain un-discovered, and "Other Man's Woman" proves to be one of the more smoldering skeletons in William Wellman's closet. Such a film would undoubtedly prove of interest in a comprehensive cycle of all of his work, but it hardly warrants serious attention on its own merits. Initially we were of two minds about playing it at all, but finally decided that its academic interest as early Wellman-Cagney pre-"Public Enemy" justified showing it.

There are two basic things wrong with "Other Man's Woman". Firstly, it's trite formula stuff all the way -- which wouldn't matter if it had better performances and more style. Walsh's "Manpower" (a very similar film) is formula stuff too, but its cliches are slamed over with such dynamism that it hardly seems to matter. But there's a shoddy, couldn't-care-less look to much of this film, and even though it's only a programmer, most Warner programmers of the period managed to look as though they were trying hard to be rather better than that. Its second major drawback is Grant Withers, who admittedly is saddled with an offensive and unsympathetic character, but who seems to add a unique coarseness all his own so that one really doesn't give a hoot about this "hero". Withers, a handsome-looking fellow, had been popular enough in late silents at Warners, but just wasn't a good enough actor to continue in the same kind of roles when talkies came in. Ironically, it was James Cagney who was to take over the majority of the roles he'd probably have gotten. Over at MGM, though on a much higher plane -- the same kind of thing was happening to Johnny Mack Brown, infinitely better than Withers, was nevertheless not a dynamic enough player to continue in talkies as a leading man to Garbo and Crawford. His roles at MGM were taken over by another newcomer, Clark Gable.

"Other Man's Woman" was formerly titled "Steel Highway", and such confusion still exists over this title switch that most reference books still list them as two separate pictures. It was the third of Cagney's four pre-"Public Enemy" movies (the one more to come was "The Millionaire") and he had been so good in the first two that it is strange indeed that the ways of contract-player usage should relegate him to such a comparatively minor role here. In his few scenes, and especially the one at the dance hall, he dominates the screen so completely that one wonders why his part wasn't built up a little more. Over at the less economy-conscious MGM, one look at the dance hall scene would have been enough for Thalberg to junk all the Withers scenes, and start re-shooting with Cagney in the lead!

For Wellman, the film is somewhat of a low-point too. He didn't really hit his stride again after "Wings" and "Beggars of Life", and his most recent films had all been fairly routine programmers. "The Public Enemy" was to be a Godsend for both him and Cagney.

Having slammed the film so thoroughly, let's now look on the cheerful side a bit. Like all Warner films of the very early thirties, it's earthy stuff, and in its fairly realistic treatment of the day-to-day lives of working men (in this case, locomotive engineers) it does offer some (unintentionally) valuable documentary coverage of the times. The sets of home and back garden are honest and convincing, and the camerawork (by little-known Chick McGill, who also did "Night Nurse" and "Doorway to Hell") spends a lot of time outdoors in the railyards, streets, and dance halls and their environs. Some of this authenticity may derive from Wellman, but it's an unconscious kind of realism that seems to pervade so many of the early Warners talkies.
It's fairly fast-paced, with enough snappy lines and good railroad ing action to prevent rigor-mortis setting in. The story climax is genuinely exciting and has some nice miniatures, though rather lacking in suspense. It's as much a forgone conclusion here that Regis Toomey's running a train over a flood-weakened bridge is not going to work as it was that it would work when John Wayne pulled the same stunt in "Tycoon." For the rest, Mary Astor is a charmingly harried heroine, and Joan Blondell does o.k. with the wisecracks, but unfortunately isn't up to a drunk scene which Harlow and Withers play into the ground. And surely, "Other Men's Women" will go down in history if for no other reason than that it offers both Fred Kohler AND Walter Long in lovable, sympathetic roles.

Intermission


Will Rogers' last film was not only one of his best, but it is also one of John Ford's loveliest films, and one of the finest pieces of Americans ever put on the screen. Remembered with a certain nostalgia, it is nevertheless continually underplayed by both Ford aficionados and Rogers devotees. The latter is perhaps understandable, since for once the Rogers character is not dominant (as it was, and stickily so, in the better-remembered "David Harum") and it really isn't a Rogers vehicle in the accepted sense. Its charm, sentiment, good old-fashioned schmaltz, comedy both subtle and wild and its excitement are such that while Rogers' underplayed sentiment certainly helps it, "Steamboat Round the Bend" could have been just as good a film with, say, Frank Morgan or Henry B. Walthall in the lead.

Slow in starting, the film builds in interest and suspense quite steadily, until the marvellous last third of the film -- the great steamboat race sequence, which apart from being great stuff in itself, forms a logical part of a "race-to-the-rescue" ending, and provides Ford with endless opportunities for literally letting off steam in the comedy department without detracting from the overall suspense. This last huge chunk of film is one of the best things Ford ever put on film. Incidentally, it makes interesting comparison with the not dissimilar ending of "Immorality". Griffith of course went on to a lengthy epilogue; Ford is quite happy to rescue his hero from the hangman and handle the whole "they lived happily ever after" angle with a couple of quick shots and an immediate fadeout.

All the way through the film there are images and sequences that bespeak of affection for the whole business of making film -- sequences too, that only a Ford (and possibly a Vidor or a Borzage) could get away with. The episode of the hero playing "Home Sweet Home" on a saw in the death house, and the negro prisoners joining him in song, sounds too horrid to contemplate. In other hands, it would be maudlin beyond acceptance. Yet here, the sincerity and its package disguised or side-step honest sentiment, it is a lovely and poignant episode. Many of the pictorial compositions look like old engravings -- especially a lovely shot of a couple of riders reining in their horses to cheer the steam-boats on.

For all its charm, excitement and sentiment, it is perhaps the comedy element that is the biggest surprise and joy, for too often with Ford his comedy has been low, coarse, crude slapstick. Here, however, his affection for the subject seems to seep through into his treatment of the characters. Being Will Rogers, as the New Moses, a religious charlatan, creates a classic comic character in the W.C. Fields vein, but with an individuality and a kind of pompous integrity which makes it far from mere imitation Fields. And Stepin Fetchit as the lazy, unintelligible, Negro handyman -- finally going berserk as he moans tuneless lyrics to a wheezy cornet -- is so hilarious, even if one never knows what he is saying -- that one really feels for the many TV audiences that must miss so many of his best scenes because of current feeling on racial stereotypes. (I wonder how many stations leave intact the scene where Berton Churchill tries to stuff him into a blazing furnace, thinking he's a wax figure of Uncle Tom?) And there's another of Francia Ford's lovable, raffish, drunken derelicts too. Altogether, "Steamboat Round the Bend" is a pure delight -- and in addition is one of those flawlessly constructed films that starts well and gets better as it goes along. (By the way, a trial scene seems to have been cut, but I suspect it was cut before release as I have seen the film regularly through the years, and have never yet seen the trial. Also, subsequent dialogue pointedly covers its excision.)

--------- WEK EVerson -------