"Broadminded" (First National, 1931) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy

Original story and screenplay by Bert Kalmar & Harry Ruby
 Cameras: Sid Hickox; Art director, Anton Groth. 7 reels

With Joe E. Brown, William Collier Jr., Osa Munion, Bela Lugosi, Margaret Livingston, Marjorie White, Thelma Todd, Grace Hampton, Holmes Herbert, Edward Hearne, Larry Steers.

After the dynamic "Five Star Final" which we showed two weeks ago, it is strange indeed to see this almost signature-less film of LeRoy's from the same year. Like so many films of the period, it is as interesting for what it doesn't do - and for what it tries to do - as for what it actually does. Although not an important or always recognizable LeRoy, there are for example traces of the pictorial style of his heavier films - the low-angled interior shots, taken from below table or chair level - which though visually quite interesting often tend to dampen the spirit of fun. On the other hand, there are the occasional sight gags - the unbalanced auto for example - which remind one of LeRoy's gag-writing days with Colleen Moore, and suggest that such moments may have come from him rather than from the film's official scenarists.

Un typical LeRoy, "Broadminded" is also un typical Joe E. Brown. There is little or none of his usual slapstick, and one can easily envision the role being played by anyone from Reginald Denny to Pat O'Brien, or even played down in favor of the other male lead. For the most part, "Broadminded" is a kind of less zany second cousin to "Coconuts", complete with a resort hotel setting, and a stuffy Margaret Dumont type aunt. The funnier portions of the film are in the first half, with a wild "baby party" in the opening, and some amusing byplay en route to California. Thereafter the film rather bogs down into standard musical comedy farce, crying out for the songs that (in the film at least; whether it actually ever was a stage vehicle I don't know) never come. The puns are sometimes pretty awful, but LeRoy keeps it all going as fast as is possible, and luckily there's a good cast to make the very most of it all. Margaret Livingston is every bit as bitchy (if not as bewitching) as she was in "Sunrise", and Thelma Todd appears in all skirt and negligee (which after all is enough)! Bela Lugosi has the same kind of comic-villain role that he has in "International House", and while I doubt that he knew he was playing for comedy, there's a rather endearing quality to Bela in this sort of part. Incidentally, my memory sometimes plays tricks on one, and my description of his role in my brief notes earlier, was a trifle off. Bela plays not a European nobleman, but a Latin one; Pancho, no less! And the running gag about a hot dog turns out instead to be about strawberry shortcake! A typical Lugosi line, after Joe E. Brown has bumped into Bela's auto: "First you ruin my strawberry shortcake, and now you damage my rear end!"

"Broadminded" has so many friendly faces, pleasingly nostalgic fashions, and at least the courage of its convictions (like an old-time vaudeville performer it keeps going at full steam even though it must be aware that a gag has fallen flat), on the theory that it can keep ahead of the audience long enough for a good gag to turn up!) so that one doesn't really mind that it's really just a time-killer, and that it just finishes rather than reaches a climax. And after all, jaded as we're all becoming these days, it's still an event to cross off another LeRoy and another Lugosi from the shrinking list of their films that have to be caught, considered, and filed away.
Screenplay by Brown Holmes, William McGreath and Sidney Sutherland, from an original story by Dorothy Mackaye and Carlton Miles; photographed by John Seitz; edited by Basil Wrangel; 7 reels. With Barbara Stanwyck, Preston Foster, Lyle Talbot, Lillian Roth, Dorothy Burgess, Maude Eburne, Harold Huber, Robert Warwick, Ruth Donnelly, Helen Ware, Devitt Jennings, Robert McWade, Geisel Cunningham, Helen Mann, Grace Cunard, Harold Healy, Madame Sul-te-Wan, Harry Gribbon, Mary Gordon.

This enjoyable prison and "confession" melodrama was ostensibly made to cash in on the notoriety surrounding the prison terms of writer Dorothy Mackaye and her husband Paul Kelly, after Kelly had killed her ex-husband in a brawl. Needless to say, the film has nothing to do with that particular case at all, but via its title and its story, "suggested" by the "experiences" of Miss Mackaye in prison, it exploited in mildly tasteless fashion her personal misfortunes. She was an actress rather than a writer, so it's unlikely that she contributed much to the screenplay other than the use of her name.

Without that rather unpleasant red herring hovering around the main titles, "Ladies They Talk About" is a thoroughly hokey, thoroughly unbelievable and equally thoroughly enjoyable piece of nonsense. All of the "mean" girls look mean with a vengeance, and all of the "nice" female cons seem to have unlimited supplies of cosmetics and clothes. All in all, prison life for girls seems to be rather a pushover, and if it weren't for Madame Sul-te-Wan, reviving some of her vitriol from "The Birth of a Nation", this particular Big House -- decorated with pictures of Doug Fairbanks Jr. and Joe E. Brown -- looks rather jolly. (Paramount seemed less generous with their gal convicts, via "City Streets" and DeMille's "Manhandled"!) The overly sentimental background music never stops, Lillian Roth is pleasingly pretty, and Stanwyck of course has her big hysterical outburst to keep the fans happy. (What a pity she and Jean Gabin were never co-starred!) Potential gangster action is often suggested, but never amounts to much apart from a well-photographed and edited jail-break sequence, and it remains a "confession" rather than a gangster movie, and all the more enjoyable because one is never asked to take it too seriously. The whole cast is type-cast with machine-made perfection, right down to Lyle Talbot playing exactly the same role that he had in "20,000 Years in Sing Sing".

Incidentally, this was Keighley's last film as an apprentice director. (He had worked under Dieterle, Curtiz etc. on "Gabin in the Cotton", "Jewel Robbery" and "The Match King". Next year, with "Easy to Love", "Dr. Monico" and a half-dozen others, he was on his own. "G Men" was only two years away. While he did share directorial credits later, the situation was reversed since on films like "Green Pastures" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" he was the veteran guiding co-directors new to film. But Bretherton never escaped "B"s and westerns.

EXTRA: THE RISE AND FALL (?) OF BETTY BOOP

Members of this society are, we know, avid Betty Boop devotees. Through the years, although she changed far less -- facially -- than Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck, she underwent some rather radical changes in dress and behaviour, and like most changes of the 20th century, they weren't necessarily changes for the better. But irregardless, Betty herself always remained a delightful tease and a wonderfully peppy personality. In selecting these four cartoons from about 15 that passed through briefly, we were more concerned with illustrating these changes than with the cartoons themselves. Thus, we're not suggesting that these are top-bracket Boops -- but they are quite delightful, and we think you'll enjoy following Betty through from 1931 to 1938. All of course are Fleischer cartoons for Paramount.
"Boop-Oop-a-Doop", made in 1931 though released in January of 1932, is quite a shocker! Betty is raped by the lecherous villain in this one, something that never happened to Minnie Mouse or even Olive Oyl!

"Bamboo Island" is a little more innocent. In this 1932 cartoon Betty is a South Sea island maiden who displays some quite astonishing cleavage as she dances the hula, and there's some racial humor which wouldn't get by later, either.

"Betty in Blunderland" is post-Code, 1934, and a takeoff on "Alice in Wonderland", and thus a little less erotic. Betty still displays plenty of cleavage and underwear, but it's a dragon rather than a human villain that has designs on her this time.

"Thrills and Chills" of 1938 is that rare thing, a good late Betty Boop. In most of the late ones, Betty was little more than a guest star, appearing at the beginning and end, with sundry other stars - like Henry, or the Little King - occupying the bulk of the footage. Even here, it is officially a "Pudgy" cartoon, but that rather unappealing little dog hasn't a chance against Betty's charm. But what a different Betty! The cleavage is all gone, well hidden beneath a huge fur coat. The head is much smaller and of normal proportions. Betty is a little standoffish, and not inclined to flirt. Those legs are still well in evidence, but no lingerie or garters! It's now far more of a Betty Grable college-girl heroine rather than the flapper of Clara Bow.

When Henri Langlois one day stages his "Homage A Betty Boop", remember that the discerning Huff Society was the first to recognize and appreciate this great and all-but-forgotten star!

Forthcoming programs:

Tuesday February 25: D.W. Griffith's ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1930)
Fritz Lang's THE TESTAMENT OF DR. MABUSE (1932)

The next Film Group meeting is scheduled for Friday February 21st. No details yet.

Coming in March/April:

Chaplin's "THE CIRCUS", "THE IDLE CLASS" and "20 MINUTES OF LOVE"
"The Mouthpiece" with Warren William, Aline MacMahon, Ralph Ince, Sidney Fox
"Madame DuBarry" directed by Dieterle, with Dolores Del Rio
"The Strange Love of Molly Louvain", directed by Curtis, with Lee Tracy, Ann Dvorak
"The Ice Flood" (1926, George Seitz) with Kenneth Harlan, Viola Dana
"Hills of Kentucky" with Rin Tin Tin, Tom Santechi, Jason Robards, Dorothy Dwan

and, to launch our British cycle, "Oh Mr. Porter", best of the British Will Hay comedies of the 30's, derivative of Keaton, and every bit as good as we'd remembered it.

LATE NEWS ITEM! Word has just reached us from Mervyn LeRoy that he likes the idea of the Huff Society, and is offering us all his prints for use. He says he has "everything", which I hope includes the silents. We'll have more details on this shortly.