Tuesday next, Dec. 29th: A program of Americana: Allan Dwan's beautiful and under-rated film "David Harum" (1915) and William Desmond Taylor's "Tom Sawyer" (1917).

December 22 1964

Two Musicals from the 30's

Both of tonight's musicals are somewhat off the beaten track in that they are rather more concerned with plot and dramatics than most musicals of their era, and both too are quite different in that one is slick and brassy, the other romantic and nostalgic. We hope you'll agree that they supplement one another rather nicely.

"HIGH, WIDE AND HANDSOME" (Paramount, 1937) Director: Rouben Mamoulian
Producer: Arthur Hornblow Jr. Story and screenplay: Oscar Hammerstein II
Lyrics: Oscar Hammerstein II; Music: Jerome Kern; Art Directors: Hans Dier, John Goodman; Musical Director, Boris Morros; Dance director, Leroy Prinz; Camera: Victor Milner; Special Effects, Gordon Jennings; Editor: Archie Marshek; 11 reels.

We have become very definite Rouben Mamoulian fanatics of late, and over the past couple of years the Huff Society has shown his "Applause", "City Streets", "Love Me Tonight", "We Live Again", "Song of Songs", "The Gay Desperado", "Golden Boy" and "The Mark of Zorro". The only major film of his now among the missing is "Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde" which sadly is now denied to all markets - theatrical, tv and educational/cultural - because ownership has been transferred to MGM, and there are too many legal tangles to be unravelled before it can be shown again. "High, Wide and Handsome" is, in a sense, the last of the films from Mamoulian's great period, and also the last of his Paramounts. (Curious how so many people - the Marx Brothers, Mamoulian, Lubitsch, von Sternberg - all seemed to do their best work at Paramount in the early 30's, and lost something which they never regained with their first film under contract to a different studio). Mamoulian's next film was "Golden Boy", marking a completely different style - almost no style at all - and an abandonment of visual design that he returned to only tenuously in "The Mark of Zorro" and "Blood And Sand".

Although inevitably a letdown if one measures it by the yardstick of "Love Me Tonight", perhaps the finest film-musical of all, rash and sweeping though such a statement is, "High Wide and Handsome" is nevertheless a fascinating and often exhilarating film. It is being over-generous to say that the Mamoulian imprint is there throughout; but it is there, definitely and quite recognisably, in certain key sequences - the "Folks Who Live On The Hill" number for example, with the immediate segue into the lively sequence of the bringing in of the oil-well. Much of the film unfortunately has the equally recognisable imprint of producer Arthur Hornblow Jr - particularly in some of those rapid, style-less studio "exteriors" - and one suspects that the sequence just referred to is a good example of Mamoulian manfully and creatively making something filmic out of blueprints laid down by Hornblow.

Certainly Mamoulian seems to have gone out of his way to play down the weak elements of plot and script - Ben Blue's poor material and dull playing is happily cut to a minimum - and to emphasise the stronger material wherever possible. Most musicals having a background of adventure or action have, usually kept it as just that - a vague background - viz "Belle of the Yukon"
and "Can't Help Singing". Here Hammerstein and Mamoulian give plot (quite a
good and unusual one, incidentally) and action the respect it deserves, so
that in terms of footage it outweighs the time devoted to music. But, summimgly,
although the action is well and elaborately staged, and the climax surprisingly
spectacular, it manages to stay logically within the framework of a musical.
Much of the action, and particularly the climactic battle, is literally
choreographed, the visual designs and patterns preventing the inherent
brutality and seriousness of it all from intruding too much on the all-important
aspects of warmth and nostalgia. Sometimes, like "Duel in the Sun", it gets
a little too big for its own good. It could do with being shorter, and perhaps
covering less ground. There are a shade too many characters and motivations to
keep track of. And in all honesty, I must admit that my enthusiasm for it is
not widely shared. Many find it a dull and ponderous film, quite unworthy of
Mamoulian. However, I confess to being quite won over by its simplicity,
charm and by a visual style which may not be consistent, but is consistently
interesting. Never a devotee of Jerome Kern music, I find myself delighted by
the songs here, not least perhaps because they are presented without frills,
without build-up, and without some egocentric song "stylist" distorting the
melody - or the meaning. And although I wouldn't know about such things, I am
assured by people who do that there is a quite astonishing attention paid to
period detail, and that the circus sequence is particularly accurate in its
decor and flavor. Irene Dunne is most appealing in the lead, though Dorothy
Lemour all but steals the show, and probably would have done if she had had a
little more footage. Randolph Scott is a pleasant but very straightforward
hero, and most of the male honors are stolen quite effortlessly by the
heavies - Hale, Bickford and Pichel. Perhaps not quite the film it should
have been -- certainly not the masterpiece it could have been had Mamoulian
made it in his prime, around the time of "Love Me Tonight" -- "High, Wide and
Handsome" certainly manages to be an enjoyably different musical, if not a
major one.

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Intermission

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"WONDER BAR" (First National, 1934) Director: Lloyd Bacon
Screenplay by Earl Baldwin from a play by Karl Parkas and Geza Berezeg;
musical numbers staged by Busby Berkeley; camera: Sol Polito
Music and Lyrics: Warren and Dubin; editor: George Amy; 9 reels
With Al Jolson, Dolores Del Rio, Kay Francis, Dick Powell, Ricardo Cortez,
Hugh Herbert, Guy Kibbee, Louise Fazenda, Ruth Donnelly, Fifi D'Orsey, Hal
Leroy, Merma Kennedy, Robert Barrat, Spencer Charters, Henry O'Neill, Henry
Kolker, Harry Woods, Albert du Mont, Adolphe Lester, Eddie Kane, Jane Darwell,
Edward Keane, Bill Elliott, Robert Cavanagh, Gino Corrado, Robert Greig, Dennis
O'Keefe, Steffi Duna, Paul Porcasi, Bud Jamison.

A sort of musical "Grand Hotel", with murder, romance and infidelity mixed in
between the numbers, "Wonder Bar", made in '33 though released the following
year, is a kind of last grand slam for the pre-Code morality. Like "Night
Nurse", it is almost totally amoral, with infidelity treated as being (a) a
joke, and (b) commonplace, murder condoned and the killer going scot free,
and a suicide not only accepted but encouraged for the purpose of tidying up
loose plot ends. Furthermore, some of the racism - and racy dialogue - has
to be heard to be believed, some of it being so doubtful that, to quote Oscar
Wilde, there is in fact no doubt at all! Yet, taken in the milieu of the time,
and admitting the very real humor that often results, it is really largely
inoffensive, and if Jews, Negroes and homosexuals seem to take a particular
beating in this one, there's some comfort in the thought that in the last reel
God, St. Peter and Abraham Lincoln get taken down a peg or two as well.
Directed at top speed by Lloyd Bacon, the film has the same crackling pace as his earlier and admittedly more substantial "42nd Street". The story-lines keep moving ever forward, the cameras swoop and glide over the glittering set, and if the comedy relief is a bit tiresome at times, it is probably only because we've now seen Messrs Kibbee, Herbert, Donnelly and the other Warner contractees go through these same paces so many other times. Jolson incidentally is perfectly cast, his bombast and ego comfortably absorbed by his role as star/impressario. The film has about the same quota of songs as most of the big Warner musicals of the period. There are only two big production numbers as opposed to the usual three, but against this the running time is shorter, and the more dramatic framework allows for better spacing of the various musical interludes. Indeed, the biggest Berkeley number is introduced very casually, quite early in the proceedings. This number, "Don't Say Goodnight", has all the traditional Berkeley wizardry and much of that breathtaking crane work and overhead pattern weaving, but for once it's a number that could feasibly and mechanically take place in a night-club. Feasible -- but not very likely -- and the customers would still have to be perched by the skylight to get the most out of it! Small wonder that the audience applauds so enthusiastically as it comes to a close!

The final number, "I'm Going to Heaven on a Mule", is something of a revelation. When "Wonderbar" played at the New Yorker on a single day booking a few years back, the complaints in their guest book were quite vehement from those who felt it was a kind of paean to Uncle Tom racism. Actually the poor innocents were not even aware that the New Yorker print was a working tv print in which the whole middle section of the number, with the most blatant stereotypes, had been bodily removed. This print has the number intact, and it gets more and more astounding as it progresses! Physically, this is one number that couldn't be staged in a night-club, and ethically and intellectually it's a number that probably wouldn't be staged anywhere. Here at the Huff we're so inured to minority-group comedy and stereotypes in films of the 20's and 30's that it is certainly not going to produce any reactions of shock and indignation, but I daresay it'll cause a little surprise. If the pressure-groups were so inclined (and if they knew their facts and film history a lot better than they do!) this little hot potato could well be made the standard-bearer for a whole new crusade, which at least would have the salutary effect of taking some of the ill-deserved heat off "The Birth of A Nation". However, at that, there's a remarkably thin-line between Busby Berkeley's Negro heaven here, and that of "Green Pastures". However well-intentioned, "Green Pastures" which once seemed so moving and sincere, today seems maudlin and offensive. Stereotypes or not, Al Jolson's minstrel heaven is at least livelier and more entertaining!

William K. Everson