March 23, 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two early talkies by William Wellman

We have often commented on the vagaries of the old studio contract systems, and this kind of machine operation was never more apparent (nor, for the most part, better justified in the long run) than at Warner Brothers. William Wellman and Michael Curtiz are especially typical of the kind of front-rank and versatile directors who moved from prestige films to pot-boilers and back again without batting an eye-lid. Today's two films are good examples of the program fare handed to Wellman when there wasn't a "Public Enemy" or a "Wild Boys of the Road" on schedule.

Accidently too, this double-bill turns out to be the kind of freak combination that happens once in a life-time. We didn't plan it this way, and it came about only because we remembered "Frisco Jenny" as being good enough to play without re-screening it first, and thereby we weren't reminded of a key plot detail.

To spell it out here would only be to spoil the fun, let me just say that the program becomes a kind of Odyssey for Donald Cook, the full impact of which is not apparent until the end of the second film. It's an awful temptation to remove the credits from "Safe in Hell", put in a "Five Years Later" title, and pass the whole thing off as some rediscovered 16-reel opio by von Stroheim!

"FRISCO JENNY" (First National, 1933) Directed by William Wellman Screenplay by Wilson Mizner and Robert Lord from a story by Gerald Beaumont, Lillie Hayward, John Francis Larkin; Camera: Sid Hickox; 8 reels


"Frisco Jenny" starts out like a good old-fashioned melodrama in the "Old San Francisco" tradition. However, the expected earthquake comes surprisingly early in the picture. It's a well-done sequence of minor spectacle, with one marvelous shot of the bottom dropping out of Robert Emmet O'Connor's saloon - quite literally! There is some stock footage of the holocaust from the silent "Old San Francisco", including that grating modern shot of a building being demolished, but most of this sequence is new, and is well done. From there on in, however, it becomes apparent that what we're in for is another variation on "Madame X", and one as close to it as possible without becoming outright plagiarism. It's old-fashioned and predictable, but it moves, both in terms of film style and in the actual ground it covers, for it winds up in the gangster and prohibition days! Considering how pat it all is, it is often surprisingly moving, thanks mainly to the work of Ruth Chatterton's best performances. James Murray is there only briefly. Donald Cook is again the self-righteous do-gooder, and, as in "Public Enemy", seems rather a prig today. The children playing Cook in varying stages of growing-up are all singularly obnoxious, which tends to work against the emotional appeal a little. Highlight sequence is a delightful business meeting of the various madames working for Miss Chatterton, a model of how to be explicit without being offensive! As in "Safe in Hell" Wellman uses some quite curious angles of attack — the elbow of a violinist for example is used to open and close one little scene — but on the whole the approach is workman-like rather than arty, full-blooded and gutsy rather than subtle. It's one of the better of the lesser-known Wellmans of the period.

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Intermission

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SAFE IN HELL (First National, 1931) Directed by William Wellman
Scenario by Maude Fulton from a play by Houston Branch;
camera: Barney McGill, 7 reels.
With Dorothy Mackaill, Donald Cook, John Wray, Ralf Harolde, Ivan Simpson,
Charles Middleton, Victor Varconi, Morgan Wallace, Cecil Cunningham,
Nina Mae McKinney, Gustav von Seyffertitz, Harold Waldridge, Clarence
Muse, Noble Johnson, Chris Pin Martin, Harry Semels, Lionel Belmore,
Kenneth MacDonald.

"Safe in Hell" is another one of the prodigious number of obscure and now-
forgotten plays that turned up so frequently as movie fodder in the early
days of sound, the romantic and genteel ones going to Rko, and the gutsier
ones to First National. So many of them had basically good little stories
that still needed good directors and colorful casts to make anything out
of them, that it's really not surprising that they lit no theatrical
bonfires. Of course, they didn't exactly turn the movie business upside
down either, but they did contribute strong and off-beat stories which
were often far meatier than those contrived by the contract studio writers.

"Safe in Hell", with its roots in "Sadie Thompson", is a curious little
film. The majority of it takes place in one basic set, which is solid and
well designed to permit camera movement, but which inevitably betrays
the theatrical origin. However, it never settles down to being just a
photographed play. Occasionally Wellman rather overdoes the off-beat camera
angles, but the camerawork on the whole is very pleasing. There are some
extremely well-composed two shots of Cook and Mackaill, including one very
tight one through wooden slats. And of course the theatrical flavor of the
plot, characters and dialogue is flavor-some and enjoyable in itself. Rarely
in one film have we ever seen so many unshaven and lecherous old rascals
all lusting after "the only white woman on the island." Morgan Wallace
re-does his Marquis de Fraindre from "Orphans of the Storm", though on an
even baser level, and when he isn't trying to seduce the heroine he's making
her (and us) a little nauseous by explaining why all the water has "wrigglers"
in it! However, it's all a shade too unpleasant to be really a "fun" movie,
nor is it of sufficient importance to be taken really seriously. It's one
of those movies that really had no reason for having been made -- yet from
its startling and flaming opening title to its very effective and quite
moving finale, it's all quite expert and attention-holding. Like Everest,
it's there - and thus has to be seen, or at least made available for seeing.
It fills us in a little more on Wellman, and perhaps that is all that it
needs to do, although I don't want to sell Dorothy Mackaill short. She's a
fine, warm and too often forgotten actress, and her performance here is
quite remarkable, and the one element that gives "Safe in Hell" whatever
integrity it has.

William K. Everson

The film added to next Tuesday's program to compensate for the short
version of "Evergreen" (see last week's notes, and the notice on
display today) is "LUCKY DEVILS" (1932), a vastly entertaining if somewhat
hokey-up hymn to the Hollywood stuntmen. It's directed by Ralph Ince, and
stars William Boyd and Dorothy Wilson, with Bruce Sabot, William Bakewell
and William Gargan. The running order of the program will be: 1) CRACKER-
JACK and intermission, 2) EVERGREEN, 3) LUCKY DEVILS.