April 13, 1965
Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two enjoyable "bad" films

By normal film society standards, which aim at fostering an appreciation for the art of the film, today's program is quite indefensible. However, as we have said many times before, we do not consider ourselves a normal film society, and while we appreciate the classics as well as anyone else, our main concern is the history of the film rather than the art of the film. Since today's films are not likely to be shown by other societies or archives, we need make no apology for resurrecting them. For their delights - intended and unintended - for their odd virtues and many flaws, they are fascinatingly typical both of their period and their studio.

"HALF SHOT AT SUNRISE" (RKO Radio, 1930) Directed by Paul Sloane
Original story and screenplay: James Ashmore Creelman; dialogue by Anne Caldwell and Ralph Spence; Camera: Nick Musuraca. Running time: 79 mins (* The copyright length of 10 reels is misleading; although the imprints on the leaders show that it was actually released in 10 reels, its total length was always 79 minutes, an equivalent of 7 1/4 reels.


Of all the screen comedy teams of the 30's and early 40's -- ranging from silent-day teams (Laurel & Hardy, Dane and Arthur) who made the transition to sound, to the later Ritz Brothers, 3 Stooges, Abbott and Costello et al, Wheeler and Woolsey were one of the oddest. Together with the Marx Brothers, they were the first of the comic teams to be created by the talkie, and it's inevitable that they overlap into Marxian territory at times. Their style is such that, as with the Marx Brothers, one should either love them or hate them, yet for a number of reasons it doesn't really work that way. For one thing, the talent of the duo seems 99% vested in Bert Wheeler, so one's loyalties are divided right away. Woolsey seems totally devoid of either a sense of cinema or a sense of fun; like Stanley Fields, he has a mildly comic face, and one can more readily envision him among the ranks of character players than as a top-flight comedian. His teaming with Wheeler must have been particularly fortuitous for him, since apart from carrying the occasional romantic ball quite winningly, Wheeler seems able to pull a lot of chestnuts out of the fire when they aren't cooking too well. Some of the highlights of their films are seemingly impromptu bits of fooling involving Wheeler alone, e.g. the scene in "Caught Fastened" where he rubs eye and mouth holes in a window covered with cleaning fluid, and flirts casually with the heroine.

Directors hardly seem to matter with Wheeler and Woolsey. With most of the other comics it is no surprise that their best films were made by directors far superior to their general run; e.g., Leo McCarey made the Marx Brothers' "Duck Soup", and William Seiter established a perfect directorial rapport with Laurel and Hardy in "Sons of the Desert". Seiter worked with Wheeler and Woolsey, but the results were hardly spectacularly above the average. Those old comedy reliables Fred Guiol and Eddie Cline made "Mummy's Boys" and "Cracked Nuts" respectively, and both are dreadful. Even George Stevens couldn't really pull it off. Yet two of their best films were made by directors in many ways inferior to any of these -- "Hips Hips Hooray" (by Mark Sandrich) and tonight's film, "Half Shot at Sunrise" (reputedly their own personal favorite) which was made by a really unimaginative clod of a director, Paul Sloane.
Since their use of slapstick was infrequent, and Wheeler and Woolsey used dialogue routines (and songs) far more than visual humor, I suppose that primarily they relied on good writers rather than good directors. Too often they were not well served in this department; "Cracked Nuts" contains some lengthy talk routines in which obvious and heavy-handed jokes are followed by worse puns, and the comics press on with determination, following the old vaudeville pattern that if you stick to it and run through enough jokes, one or two are bound to pay off. Writers for the Marx Brothers had the wit to use bad jokes in a contemptuous way, so that you laughed at the sheer gall of a pun rather than its cleverness. The writing for Wheeler and Woolsey is too evenly paced for such a technique to work -- one always has too much time with them to dissect a joke -- but once in a while a writer comes up with a skit quite separate from the rest of the film in which their peculiar naivete really works -- and builds. Such a sequence is the restaurant episode in "Half-Shot at Sunrise", with the boys masquerading as waiters. Some of the outrageously yet inoffensively "blue" material pays off well too, especially when pert and peppy Dorothy Lee, a regular in their troupe, is involved. Here she's at her best as an energetic nymphomaniac, and adds a lot of zip to the film.

An inevitable strike against Wheeler and Woolsey was that they made their films for Eko and in the early thirties. During these years, the studio was the least interesting of all the major studios -- a few "specials" like "King Kong" and "Topaze" apart -- and the one most bound to the traditions of the stage. There was always the feeling in early Eko films that the sound track was considered of far more importance than the picture, and too there was always the feeling of restraint, as though no star, or director, was ever really being given his head. Despite the limitations of Woolsey, one has the feeling that had they been making films over on the free-wheeling Paramount lot, or even at Warners, they would have come up with much funnier films. Nevertheless, their films were very popular, inexpensive to make, and made money at the boxoffice. They were also very popular in England, where their style resembled that of popular British radio comedies. Apart from Jack Buchanan, British movies had no major sound-screem comedians in the early thirties. Will Hay, Jack Hulbert and George Formby were to come later, and thick-ear slapstick with lesser stars like Leslie Fuller was still considered inferior to the Wheeler and Woolsey brand of humor. Indeed, a W & W comic strip was very popular in England right through the 30's.

All of this preamble really says very little about "Half Shot at Sunrise", but their work has been unseen for so long that it is really rather necessary. On the whole, it stacks up as one of their better and bigger films. The sets are often quite handsome, and the production values good. There is some good music by Harry Tierney, who worked on several of their films, and died just a week or two ago. Some of the sequences in it rank with Wheeler & Woolsey's best, and while there are awkward and slow spots, the film never descends to the embarassingly bad level of "Cracked Nuts" or "Hold 'Em Jail". Only in its climax does it rather come a cropper, for the writers seem unable to decide how to handle the big war climax they've built up to. Their solution was apparently to side-step it on the grounds that war isn't very funny, and so the climax is neither fish nor fowl, a combination of undeveloped comedy and perplexing dramatics, which brings the film to its end but does nothing else. However, prior to that there have been some wonderfully insane moments, so we can afford to be charitable about the misfire final reel.

--- Intermission ---

"FRIENDS AND LOVERS" (Eko Radio, 1931) Director: Victor Schertzinger
Screenplay by Jane Murfin and Wallace Smith from a story by Maurice de Kobra; camera: Roy Hunt; 7 reels
With: Adolphe Menjou, Erich von Stroheim, Laurence Olivier, Lili Damita,
Hugh Herbert, Frederick Kerr, Blanche Fredericq, Vandim Ureneff, Lal Chand Nehra, Yvonne D'Aroy, Kay Deslys, Dorothy Wolbert.

It's difficult to know just how to take "Friends and Lovers" because it's quite obvious that nobody in the film knows quite how to take it either. Victor Schertzinger, a veteran since the Ince days, was both an expert director and a composer of delightful music, and one gets the impression that he gave it all up as a bad job before he started, and turned in the routine photographed play that was expected of him. Menjou, ever the professional, plays it straight, with urbanity and polish. Lili Damita, all rouge, lingerie and gardened stockings, plays it for all-out sex appeal. Stroheim, obviously contemptuous of the whole farrago, decides to play it for its absurdity, relishing every over-done line, and using his monocle and whip as props whenever he has nothing else to do. Yet, for all his jovial villainy, the menace is still projected when it's needed. All of his scene-stealing tricks are trotted out too, although much of the time it's a wasted effort, since he wraps everything up the minute he walks on stage. Yet he takes no chances, and note how he milks even a simple letter-writing scene by testing the nib of the pen, and grimacing at it! All of which, by a process of elimination, brings us to the incredible performance by Laurence Olivier. His gallant, old-school-tie Englishman, through curious writing, emerges as a strangely effeminate portrait. The dialogue unintentionally embellishes this by giving him one or two double-entendres that are real howlers. At one point he and Menjou are congratulating each other on having found the girl of their respective dreams, and Olivier rhapsodizes about all the things they've been through together -- drinking sprees, wars, -- "and now," he finishes grandly, "we're in love together!"

Perhaps I'm unfair in making it all sound so hilarious, and I am hardly - heaven forbid - suggesting that you approach it in a spirit of levity. Indeed, its unwitting humor comes through all the more if one tries to take it seriously. Yet it really defies being taken completely seriously. The dialogue is so stagey and so out-of-date (a gentleman, at one point, is defined as he who loans his polo ponies to a friend!) that one wonders why in heaven's name they didn't try to make a film out of it. There's plenty of opportunity to get away from the confines of the stage, since the locales range from Paris to the North West frontier. But the big battle scene takes place entirely off-screen, and one has the feeling that the whole quite handsome set is only there because it was borrowed from some other picture -- probably Brenon's "Beau Ideal" of the same year. The few exteriors are at drab Chatsworth, a few miles outside Hollywood.

However, with all the names involved, "Friends and Lovers" couldn't be anything but fascinating and entertaining. And while we hope you'll treat it respectfully if not with reverence, don't feel too much of a traitor to the cause of old film if you chuckle occasionally. After all, Laurel & Hardy spotted it in its true colors right away, and used its story basis for their own "Beau Hunks!"