
Tuesday June 8th: Marya LeRoy's SHOWGIRL IN HOLLYWOOD (1930) with Alice White, Jack Mulhall, Blanche Sweet; and William Seiter's KISS ME AGAIN (1930) from MILE HODINTE, with Walter Pidgeon, Bernice Claire, Edward Everett Horton.

Tuesday May 18 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Screenplays by Frank Wead

"TAILSPIN" (20th Century Fox, 1939) Directed by Roy Del Ruth; produced by Harry Joe Brown; story and screenplay: Frank Wead; camera: Karl Freund; 8 reels


I suppose "camps" is the quickest and aptest contemporary description to apply to "Tailspin," although it's fast becoming a term inviting ridicule from that obnoxious breed of MMA and New Yorker Saturday afternooners, so it's a phrase we can't be too sympathetic to here at the Huff Society. Certainly none of us can take "Tailspin" too seriously — it's absurd, wildly overblown Hollywood; yet it is not without skill or entertainment values, and it is certainly a thoroughly typical product of its period.

For Wead (about whom more in the notes on "Air Mail") to descend to this kind of scripting is rather like having Herman Melville do a "Son of the Sea Hawk" just a few years after "Moby Dick." There's a parallel decline in Karl Freund's camerawork too — here all slick and glossy, with studio wind machines and much back projection and a far cry from the often brilliant camerawork he achieved in "Air Mail." However, there are certainly exasperating circumstances with Freund, in that Universal's special effects department was always superb, and in that he turned in some superb photographic jobs again after "Tailspin."

As a "fun" film, "Tailspin" really doesn't need the pretentious dignity of program notes. Alice Faye is in it, so naturally a song has to be dragged in, and who are we to complain? A hair-pulling flight between a couple of the girls is too close for comfort to a 3 Stooges mayhem scene. And attempts to get arty with the dialogue produce some real howlers, as when one of the girls has blown herself to anathesans in a crashing plane and an onlooker solemnly intones, "There was something beautiful about it." Seen in its right perspective, and remembering that 1939 was also the year of "Nancy Drew and The Hidden Staircase," "Nick Carter Master Detective," "Susanna of the Mounties," "The Secret of Dr. Kildare" and "Tarzan Finds a Son," "Tailspin" should be an enjoyable hunk of nostalgia, and in case that collection of titles sounds a depressing note, recall that 1939 also gave us "Of Mice and Men," "Young Mr. Lincoln," "Son of Frankenstein" and "Stagecoach." In addition it gave us "Women in the Wind," which was Warners' own "Tailspin," with Kay Francis approximating Constance Bennett's role in tonight's film.

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Intermission

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"AIR MAIL" (Universal, 1932) Directed by John Ford; written by Lieut-Comdr. Frank Wead and Dale van Every; camera: Karl Freund; 8 reels.


After Lindberg's flight to Paris the movies not surprisingly went in for a spate of aerial films. "Photoplay" indeed predicted that the aerial hero would completely displace the cowboy star, and make the western obsolete! 
Basically, the serial films fell into two camps, the lesser of which (in terms of output) was the World War One melodrama, and a smaller offshoot dealing with fliers in the post-war period ("The Lost Squadron" "The Last Flight"). And admittedly, this cycle -- "The Dam Patrol", "The Eagle and the Hawk", "The Ace of Aces" etc. -- was still a hangover from the enthusiasm generated by "Wings" and "Hell's Angels" as much as it was a direct derivation from the Lindbergh excitement. But the other and more prolific camp was something else again: this dealt with the birth and growth of civil air transport and the armed forces' experiments with new types of planes, new bombing tactics and so forth. This cycle continued through the twenties with films like "Caging Zero", "China Clipper", "Test Pilot", "Men With Wings", "I Wanted Wings" and "Wings of the Navy" until given new impetus by World War Two.

Columbia and Metro seemed to turn out the most (and best) of the serial epics in the 1929-1933 years and they all seemed to be written by one man -- Lieut. Universal "The Flying Fleet" was his; so was "Hell Divers"; and "Dirigible". And of course "Air Mail" which Universal made just a few years later as a Jack Holt vehicle, and a different plotline, as "Store Over the Andes". Welles also worked on Ford's "They Were Expendable", and was himself the subject of a Ford biopic, "The Wings of Eagles". While "Air Mail" isn't quite as elaborate as the MGM entries, it's still a mighty rugged and well done film, rich up to the kind of adventure yarn one expects from Ford & Wead, and immeasurably better than the similar but pedestrian "Blaze of Noon", made by Paramount in the 40s. Unlike the Paramount opus, which talked away most of its footage on the ground, "Air Mail" keeps most of its action aloft. Like so many films built around early days of flight, it has the airport surrounded by mountains and high tension wires, and constantly menaced by hurricanes and snow. If it seems that more planes crash than get through, one must put it all down to dramatic license. In any case, all the air films of the thirties and forties now seem so incredibly dated in a technological sense that one unconsciously places them in an era far more distant than that to which they actually belong, and thus the mortality rate among planes is easier to accept. "Air Mail" certainly has some excellent aerial thrills and stunts, well staged crashes and other excitements -- including a couple of stock shots from "SOE Lieber" --. The back projection is much above average for 1932, the miniature and special effects work really first-class, and in any event much of the stuff thrill is the real thing. Presumably the stunt flying was done by Paul Nantz; his name appears on one of the lockers in the closing reel.

The film may be formula stuff, but it's put over with a real punch. If there are too many characters and too many "types" given familiar bits of business, there are pleasant deviations from cliches too, and Pat O'Brien is a surprisingly convincingly written role. However, "Air Mail" is less recognizably a Ford film than most of his other service pictures were. This was a strange, transient period for Ford, and he was making some very odd and untypical pictures. Wallace Beery's "Flesh" was another off-beat one of the same period. Just how Ford came to be assigned to "Air Mail" is a bit of a mystery, since he hadn't been with Universal for years -- not since the Harry Carey westerns -- and he hadn't made a film for Universal since, either. One wonders why the property didn't go to William Wyler or James Whalen, the studio's best contract directors. There is comparatively little background music (though it's used most effectively in Russell Hopton's death scene), but in the often beautifully composed photography, and in the use of familiar supporting players (Pennick, Francis Ford), Ford's hand is more apparent. Wead by the way gets a solo credit for dialogue, and on the strength of this film at least seems to have been a pungent as well as a gutsy writer; there are some very snappy lines here and there, with an occasional borderline wisecrack that has that old Fordian air. All the cuts are well played and handled, and a few scratches & splices, it is on the whole in good shape -- from the fine opening titles (sound effects of the pony express and the locomotive finally merging into the roar of a plane) to the final cast listing. Some scenes are often cut for TV (and in the old days, home & school use) -- for example the pilot's death in the blazing plane -- but in that respect this print is quite intact. And finally -- what a pleasure to see again those two ladies from "The Old Dark House", the misfit Bond and Stuart. Certainly not a major Ford, "Air Mail" is one of his least-known and in many ways one of his best. At the beginning Merian C. Cooper wanted to revere Ford, he has never seemed to mean much at the Huffian boxoffices, and few of our Ford programs have broken even. When we last ran "Air Mail" some six years ago, it had not arrived on TV -- and yet the audience for it was small. It'll be interesting to see whether this program devoted more to Wead and the aerial film per se will produce a larger audience. But we'll keep after the rarer Fords.... anybody hiding a print of "Comeo Kirby"? ---

Wm. A. Everson