TWO EARLY SOUND MUSICALS

"KISS ME AGAIN" (First National, 1930; released 1931) Dir: William A. Seiter
Based on the Victor Herbert-Henry Blossom operetta "Mademoiselle Modiste"
screenplay by Julian Josephson and Paul Perez; camera: Al Glikes and
Lee Garmes; edited by Peter Fritch; 8 reels.
With Bernice Claire, Walter Pidgeon, June Collyer, Edward Everett Horton, Frank
McHugh, Judith Vossell, Albert Crann, Claude Gillingwater, Charles Davis,
Lionel Belmore.

Not to be confused with the unrelated silent Ernst Lubitsch comedy of the same
title, "Kiss Me Again" is however a remake of sorts, "Mademoiselle Modiste"
having been made earlier - in 1926 - as a Corinne Griffith vehicle. Like many
musicals of late 1930 and early 1931, it is comparatively shy on musical
numbers. The big musical boom of 29 was over, and the musical tag was often a
liability rather than an asset; thus many important musical properties were
reshaped and presented largely as dramas or comedies. When the musical boom
revived in '33, Warners curiously dusted off some of these comparatively
unexploited properties, and did them again as 2-reelers. "Fifty Million
Frenchmen", done sans songs as an Oisen and Johnson comedy, was re-done as a
Bob Hope 2-reeler, "Paree Paree" (we showed it last year) and was literally a
non-stop succession of hit songs. Likewise, "Kiss Me Again" was done as a
2-reeler in '33, under the title "Fifi", with far more of the music utilised.

Although "Kiss Me Again" uses more music than most of the doctored operettas
of 30-31, it does seem to stress the title number predominantly. Thus it
becomes more of a comedy with music, which is perhaps why it presents such a
dated aspect, for little attempt is made to zip up the bare bones of the very
thin operetta plot -- so threadbare at times that it even falls back on the
old "Camille" situation of the father trying to buy off the bride-to-be with a
check. The period is always a little uncertain, despite Frank McHugh's very
1930-ish presence, and it has at least one of the typical frustrations of the
early-sound filmed operetta. A florid title places the hero "under an Algerian
moon" and he is given one of those meaningless but pregnant little bits of
dialogue about having to fill in his reports, but a dimly lit tent is all we
ever get to see of Algeria! Not that it really matters or is a criticism of
the film -- perhaps I am just recalling the teeth-grinding frustrations of my
own childhood when such set-ups in movies always led me to expect at least a
big battle a la the last reel of "Under Two Flags".

Alan Crosland's "Viennese Nights" (1929) is still about the best and most
cinematic of all these early operettas, and what a great pity that it is not
currently available. "Kiss Me Again" does however, hold up fairly well consider-
ing that its basic values -- the songs -- have been so severely rationed. The
sets are nice and solid, the camera very mobile, and the music of the romantic-
nostalgic variety that one can listen to all day (or at least, I can) even if
one never can quite separate "The Love Parade", "Babes in Toyland", "The Vagabon
King" and "Mademoiselle Modists" one from the other. Fortunately too, the
background score makes constant use of the lilting melodies, and this also
helps quite a little to overcome the lethargy of the creaking plot mechanics.
Originally the film had an additional fillip in that it was photographed in the
old two-color Technicolor; the only surviving prints are in black-and-white,
but the photography here remains far sharper than in "On With the Show", and it
is really only the ruddy cheeks and lips and other makeup created for color,
that give the game away. Certainly not a major William Seiter film, "Kiss Me
Again" still has the overall charm one expects from the man who gave us "Some
of the Desert" and "Skinner's Dress Suit".
"SHOWGIRL IN HOLLYWOOD" (First National, 1930) Directed by Nervyn LeRoy
Screenplay by Harvey Thew and James A. Starr from the J.P. McEvoy
8 reels.

With Alice White, Jack Mulhall, Blanche Sweet, Ford Sterling, John Miljan,
Virginia Sale, Spec O'Donnell, Lee Shumway, Herman Bing, Rolfe Sedan, Billy
Bletcher, Syd Saylor, Maurice Black, and, as themselves, Noah Beery Sr., Noah
Beery Jr., Al Jolson, Ruby Keeler, Loretta Young and Walter Pidgeon.

Although started in late '29, and thus almost a year older than "Kiss Me Again",
"Showgirl in Hollywood" seems far more modern both in content and technique —
the latter being especially noteworthy in that pictorially it is often more
akin to the best silents, and thus may well have been considered "old fashioned"
movie-making in 1930.

Quite apart from the snappy songs, chorus girls and veteran players, what
pleases most about "Showgirl in Hollywood" is that it is one of the best and
most convincing yarns about Hollywood. Not that it aspires to any of the
cynicism or unvarnished truth of "Sunset Boulevard"; it remains a Cinderella
tale. But it is not trying to be smart at the expense of Hollywood (as was the
overdone and only spasmodically funny "Once in a Lifetime") nor is it trying
desperately to recreate a bygone era. It is using contemporary Hollywood as a
background for a contemporary tale, and thus is under no compunction to name
drop or establish milieu. After the horrendous distortions of movies like
"The Perils of Pauline" and "The Buster Keaton Story" which created deliberate
no-man's-lands of falsification, it's pleasing to sit back and see a film in
which the modus operandi, if over-simplified, is reasonably representative, and
in which the cameras are right merely because they were the cameras in use at
the time. (In this respect, it's worth noting that the 1939 "Hollywood
Cavalcade", reseen recently, seems far better than it did originally; very
entertaining, and as a movie history lesson, not at all bad as a kind of
introductory primer).

"Showgirl in Hollywood" starts in a fairly routine manner, but builds
steadily. Its breezy opening manner is deceiving, and the poignancy of its
dramatic high points often bowl one over because one just isn't prepared for
them. Blanche Sweet as the "fading star" of 32 is really quite fine, and in
the light of some of today's matrons (Doris Day etc.) not to mention the
grandmother category who still grind out the footage as heroines, it's quite
startling to recall that there was a day in Hollywood when a star over 30 could
be considered passe. The sequence wherein Miss Sweet contemplates suicide —
a beautifully done silent sequence, with some quite breathtaking
camerawork — is a standout, reminding one of the best silent work of Borzage,
and certainly a remarkable episode to have been done by a young and still
fairly superficial director. It's good to see Alice White in a starring role,
and a curiously prophetic one too, since her arrogance and aggressiveness
apparently matched her screen character here, and hastened her decline. Herman
Bing too, is seen in a role paralleling his old job as assistant to and
trouble-shooter for F.W. Murnau, and if it comes across as a semi-comic job it
is probably only because of what we read into it from scores of marvellous
later Bing cameo roles.

The only loose end I detected was in that constant reference to an all-important
library scene needed as the "climax" to Miss White's movie. Needless to say,
when the movie is finally premiered, it comes to its climax with a typical
musical production number. This closing sequence was obviously also in two-
color Technicolor originally. Entertaining throughout, "Showgirl in Hollywood" is
also a much better picture than it seems at first; the impression it leaves is
a lasting one, and I suspect that you'll be thinking about it, and looking back
on it, with a great deal of pleasure weeks — and years — from now.

W.K. Everson ---