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Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two more "lost" films reclaimed

"THE HALF-NAKED TRUTH" (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by Gregory LaCava
Executive producer: David O. Selznick; Ass. Producer: Pandro S. Berman
Screenplay by Gregory La Cava and Corey Ford from a story by Ben Markson
and H.N. Swanson, suggested by "Phantom Fame" by Harry Reichenbach;
camera: Bert Glennon; Music: Max Steiner; 8 reels

With Lee Tracy, Lupe Velez, Frank Morgan, Eugene Pallette, Shirley Chambers,
Bob McKenzie, James Donlon, Charles Dow Clark, Si Jenks, Henry
Boggs, Thomas Jackson, Brooks Benedict, Franklin Pangbourne.

Back in 1932, "The Half-Naked Truth" gained a near-notorious reputation
which today is a little hard to fathom. True, it's often raw and racily, and
there's a running gag about a eunuch which incidentally is very funny, but
it's no nearer the knuckle than "Blessed Event" and other satires of the
period. I suspect that it was largely the title that caused most of the
trouble, since at that time the word "naked" was definitely not in common
usage in polite film-title circles. In fact, throughout the whole silent
period the word had been used infrequently, and only once by a major company
(Universal) for a film ("Naked Fists") that was clearly an action subject.
And even its use by independent producers and exporters was a context
that suggested allegorical and emotional rather than physical content -- i.e.,
"A Naked Soul". Today the word has become so common in beefing up film titles
like "The Naked City", "The Naked Hills", "The Naked and the Dead", "The Naked
Jungle", "The Naked Spur" etc. that it has become a meaningless cliché. But
in '32 it was still rather a startling word to find in a film title, and
since the advertising and stills featured a frequently underclad Lupe Velez,
and the content was sometimes a little on the rough side, the word got
around. Pressure groups objected to it, and many exhibitors played it on an
Adults Only basis. It may well have been this "reputation" which kept it
under wraps for so long, and why when official requests were put through for
screening prints for stock footage and other uses, the reply was usually a
disguised turn down, accompanied by the excuses of deteriorated negative, no
prints, and legal complications. There is no "official" ban on its current
tv use, though most stations automatically turn it down. One sequence with
a negro maid is enough to start the NAACP on a Freedom March against any Late
Late Show with the temerity to show it. And those gags about the eunuch are
so interspersed with other action that they are almost impossible to cut
out. However, they are also a model of how to get away with murder without
actually saying anything. The whole running gag is started off by Lee Tracy
entering Eugene Pallette's name in a hotel register, and answering Franklin
Pangbourne's raised eyebrows with a confided "Every Turkish harem has one;
they're very expensive!"

While a lesser satire of press-agentry than "Blessed Event" was of columnists,
"The Half-Naked Truth" is nevertheless a most enjoyable little frolic that
keeps up a crackling pace. LaCava keeps his action on the move in a manner
matching Tracy's rapid delivery, so even when nothing is really happening,
there's no time to realise it. Although the "definitive" La Cava picture,
"My Man Godfrey", came some four years later, this was his busiest and in some
ways most interesting period, with films like this one, "Gabriel Over the
White House", "Age of Consent" and "Bed of Roses" following one after the
other without a let-up. Disciplined, his films were nevertheless full of the
unexpected -- as here in the Lubitsch-like sequence where office sounds form
a song. A real pleasure too is the quite extensive New York location work,
primarily at Grand Central, and along 5th Avenue opposite the Public Library.
Only in its climax does it disappoint a little. It seems to run out of steam in the last half-reel and is content to just tie up the loose ends, instead of hitting hard until the very end, as "Blessed Event" did. And by then we've had too much fun to really feel like complaining. "The Half-Naked Truth" is fairly superficial as satires go, and isn't in the same league as a "My Man Godfrey" or a "Nothing Sacred", but it's still too good and too lively a film to have been so long relegated to obscurity.

INTERMISSION

"HELL'S HIGHWAY" (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by Rowland Brown
Executive Producer: David O. Selznick; Original story and screenplay by Rowland Brown, Samuel Ornitz and Robert Tasker; camera: Edward Cromjager; Music: Max Steiner; 7 reels

Largely on the strength of memories and the reputation of the long-unseen and possibly no longer extant "Quick Millions", Rowland Brown has been added to the ranks of those enigmatic and alleged "great" directors whose work is no longer available for study. I do not use the word "great" in any sense of derision, since I haven't seen "Quick Millions" since 1934, when I was perhaps too young to appreciate it, though I recall it impressing me less than "Scarface" at the time. Brown was an idea man who graduated to writing ("Doorway to Hell") and thence to writing-directing, with an obvious aptitude for crime and underworld themes. But his writing-directing period spanned but a couple of years; in 1934 he was replaced as the director of Korda's "The Scarlet Pimpernel" by Harold Young, and for the rest of the 30's and early 40's remained solely a writer, odds and ends (for him) like "The Devil is a Sissy" and "Robin Hood of El Dorado" interspersed between traditional underworld stories like "Angels With Dirty Faces" and "Johnny Apollo".

Curiously, despite this record, "Hell's Highway" would suggest that he was actually a better director than writer. Its novelettish story-line, and its involved juxtaposition of characters and coincidence, prevent its ever becoming as important or serious a treatment of the chain-gang theme as "I Was a Fugitive From a Chain Gang". Yet its purpose is sincere enough. Occasionally there are incidents of surprisingly moving poignancy — the death of the deaf-mute, who does not hear the command to surrender for example — and the imagery throughout is stark and dramatic. I remember an old issue of "Experimental Cinema" contrasting a still from this with a far more formally composed work-gang still from a Russian film, and extolling the Russian version while condemning Brown's for being chaotic and shapeless. In retrospect, one can see that "Experimental Cinema" chose that still deliberately to score a point, for oddly enough "Hell's Highway" does have a formalised kind of photography, very reminiscent of the Russian school in such films as "The Ghost That Never Returns".

"Hell's Highway" is rough, but never quite as brutal as one expects it to be. It also has free-wheeling lines and characters typical of the pre-Code days, and infences that would never have passed muster a bare two years later. Richard Dix is his usual tower of strength, and there is an interesting characterisation by C. Henry Gordon as a musically-inclined sadist that somewhat foreshadows Hume Cronyn's prison warden in "Brute Force". The film hardly establishes Brown as a giant of cinema, but it does suggest that if it had not been for the intangibles that apparently wrecked his career, he might have become, like Robert Florey, one of those perennially inventive and interesting makers of well-above-average minor films, whose careers are often more productive and worthy of study than those of the established "prestige" directors.

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