Tuesday, next, Sept. 7th. Two wild, free-wheeling comedies from the mid-30's.
HIPS HIPS HOBRAZ (1934, dir: Mark Sandrich) with Wheeler & Woolsey, Thelma Todd
GOTN' TO TOWN (1935, dir: Alexander Hall) with Mae West, Paul Cavanagh

Tuesday August 31st 1965  The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

55 Minutes of Animation

"NO SAIL" (Rko-Disney, 1945) Director: Jack Hannah; Technicolor; one reel.

When it first appeared, this curious Disney seemed rather morbid; in the 20
subsequent years of course, cartoons have reached such heights (or depths?) of
savagery that it now seems quite mild and more amusing, despite being rather
like an animated "Greed!"

RAINBOW DANCE (G.P.O. Film Unit, Britain, 1935) Directed by Len Lye;
Ink & Paint; one reel

The Len Lye films of the 30's seem to get better as the years go by, perhaps
because contemporary abstract films grow more and more grotesque and less and
less charming. "Rainbow Dance", with its interesting color and intriguing
visuals, remains a delight -- though for the money it must have cost, its
"message" is somewhat light on impact.

THE UGLY DUCKLING (Rko-Disney, 1938) Technicolor; one reel

This hardy Disney perennial is always worth another look. Possibly a trifle
sticky, and lacking the healthy sadism that gave a little more backbone to
other Silly Symphonies like "The Old Mill", it is nevertheless a most winning
cartoon, with a very modern sense of humor to put a little edge on the overdoses
of pathos.

CHRISTMAS CRACKER (National Film Board of Canada, 1953) McLaren and others;
Technicolor; one reel

Although unquestionably this must have received U.S. art house distribution,
it's an item that eluded me until now, so it may be new to you too. A most
imaginative blending of live action, stop motion and simple cartoon work, it
is a lively and consistently interesting example of the off-beat animation work
that the National Film Board of Canada have specialised in in recent years.

WINDOW CLEANER (Rko-Disney, 1940) Technicolor; one reel

Somewhat of a companion piece to Disney's earlier "Clock Cleaners", but with
Mickey Mouse now on the skids and Donald Duck and Pluto taking over as Disney's
fl stars, "Window Cleaner" is a fast and exciting cartoon in the "Safety Last"
mold. Disney used height -- skyscrapers, mountains etc -- far more than
other cartoon-makers, and with more concern for perspective and the convincing
illusion of dizzy depths. Height gags in WB and MGM cartoons were always just
that -- rapid gags that paid off quickly in a laugh, and without a buildup.
Disney on the other hand used height much as Lloyd did, to counterpoint comedy
with a genuine thrill. "Window Cleaner" is a good example of this brand of

cartoon.

INTERMISSION

THE SINGING POOL (Warner Brothers, 1928) Director: Lloyd Bacon
Original story: Leslie S. Barrow; scenario: Graham Baker
Camera: Byron Haskin; Dialogue & Titles: Joseph Jackson
Assistant Director: Frank Shaw; 11 reels
With Al Jolson, Betty Bronson, Josephine Dunn, Dave Lee, Arthur Housman,
Reed Howers, Edward Martindel, Robert Emmett O'Connor, Helen Lynch.

Quite often one wonders why a seemingly sure-fire film is never reissued.
Putting aside the question of legal ramifications, many films would seem to
have tremendous potential for a limited but still lucrative theatrical revival.
Sometimes they are revived and justify all expectations; other times they
fizzle abysmally, witness the first tryout screenings of "Grand Hotel", although
by now it has built itself up to boxoffice proportions again. But after the
successful reissue of Jolson's "The Jazz Singer", the persistent nagging
question was "Why not "The Singing Pool" too?" Except for a couple of odd
theatrical bookings in London, it never was revived -- and tonight we find
out why. We had no opportunity to pre-screen it until the night before the
show, and even if we had, the decision would have remained unchanged. Obviously
it has to be seen again -- once. The Jolson fans will lap it up, and those
who are more interested in film history than Al will find it fascinating -- and
illuminating. But, get a steady grip on yourself and prepare for something that can only be described as an "experience".

"The Singing Fool" is of course only a part talkie, and because it still has its roots in the silent cinema it never becomes as static as the musicals of a year later. The opening reel is even so moving——camera-crazy that one half expects a film as bizarre as Fajos' "Broadway". But on its own, it is a sad commentary on what talkies — and the Jolson personality — had reduced the art of the cinema to. Among the press-shows that same week in September of 1928 were two great silents, von Sternberg's "Docks of New York" and Keaton's "The General"—and Fajos' lovely, creative part-talkie "Lonesome". Now the great silents are on the screen or in his favor from "The Singing Fool" is pushed aside as an experiment, and "The Singing Fool" is lauded by "The Film Daily" as "... a complete vindication for the advocates of sound pictures ... the finest example of sound pictures made to date".

Despite the greater emphasis on dialogue scenes, which become more frequent as the film progresses, "The Singing Fool" is a far lesser film than "The Jazz Singer" which preceded it. To call the story maudlin is an understatement, but its major defect is Jolson himself, who is allowed to sing and emote and make it all up without any kind of discipline at all. Some of it is so out of control — the telephone call at the New Year's party for example — as to seem downright hilarious. Honest sentiment — the sentiment of Jolson's later "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" — is rare on the screen today, and we miss it. But it is not honest sentiment that flaws "The Singing Fool"; it is blatantly dishonest contrived bathos, which is so syrupy and clinging that you can almost see it on the screen. (This effect is heightened by the partially decomposed and hypoized print, which seems to hit back by disintegrating just as Jolson becomes most unbearable, and all that is really working in some scenes is for Al to have a little white puppy dog run under a steam-roller.)

It will be seen that "The Singing Fool" is not to be taken too seriously, but it does have a certain academic interest. The musical score, badly mixed and often drowning out the dialogue, has a certain charm and shows a determined effort on somebody's part to display musical knowledge. The classics are intermingled with popular melodies, and on at least once occasion "Pagliacci" and "Laugh Clown Laugh" are sang away in competition when Al is really low. The camera speeds vary somewhat, but on the whole the photography is good; bear in mind that this print is obviously doped from a fast-fading original. When Warmers used excerpts from "The Singing Fool" in shorts in the 40's, their original material was in much better shape. Titles are sometimes used illegitimately, as they rarely were in full silents, to cover huge gaps in continuity and to present as a fast-accupi events that could never logically have been shown. The songs include a number of standards, including "Rainbow Round My Shoulder", "Seventeen Of The World" and of course "Sonny Boy", done three times and once — quite incongruously — in black-face. (The later "Sonny Boy" movie with Dave Lee and Betty Bronson was not a Jolson vehicle.)

We asked Betty Bronson for her recollections of the film, and she sent along many pages of notes, most of them generalizations about the problems of making early sound films which will be too familiar to most of you to need repetition here. She did comment too, though that this film, far more than "The Jazz Singer" or "Lights of New York", really sold Warmers on sound and convinced them that their faith had been justified. On Jolson while respecting him as a performer, she is somewhat less than enthusiastic. He made it a point to see that dialogue to players other than himself was severely rationed, and indeed most players in dialogue scenes merely have a word or at most a sentence to bounce off Al and provide more raison-d'être for another burst of bombast from him.

He was also most demanding about billing — on the film and in advertising — had the two women's roles cut down far more than in the original script, and was far from pleasant to work with. Lloyd Bacon she recalls as a director who lacked a sense of humour, and kidded with the cast; Jolson's wont was to make fun of the players who were trying to make a scene or a bit of business, and then squash them with "Is that supposed to be good?". Obviously director Bacon, who did such an impressive job on "42nd Street" and other backstage musicals, is better with plots and fast-paning than with star vehicles, and seemed to be somewhat under Jolson's thumb here. Still, there are signs that he knew what he was up against — some of Jolson's most potentially unbearable scenes are fortunately played silent (though they may not have looked so at the time). Anyway, the whole, Miss Bronson has much happier recollections of working with Jack Benny ("wonderful, modest, humble star") the following year in "The Medicine Man". Though limited in "The Singing Fool", she is most charming — and after seeing that lovely face, dialogue-less, in the earlier scenes, it is rather a shock when Jolson is forced to let her talk in the latter half of the film. Not that there is anything wrong with her voice — but she was just one of those graceful, purely visual creatures who was perennially "Peter Pan", and from whom any voice and contact with reality seemed wrong.

William K. Everson