Tuesday next: A tribute to Constance Bennett and Nancy Carroll: TWO AGAINST THE WORLD (1932) and an excerpt from MARRIED? (1925); SWEETIE (1929) and excerpts from HONEY and PARAMOUNT ON PARADE (1929)

October 19 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A Douglas Fairbanks Silent/Sound Program

REACHING FOR THE MOON (1917) ----------- REACHING FOR THE MOON (1931)

In terms of billing at least, tonight's films literally provide a well-balanced program. They also show us Doug sr., near the beginning of his career, and near the end -- in both cases doing the kind of things that so many of us feel he did best. Film history may recall Doug best for his handful of elaborate swashbucklers made in the 20's, many of which were certainly diverting, and all of which certainly had the fringe values of spectacle and huge-scale production qualities. But to most of us, "Doug" conjures up the image of the zippy, sophisticated modern comedies, of which tonight's two films are fine and thoroughly entertaining examples. Apart from the repetition of the title, there is no connection between the two films, and the one is not a remake of the other.

"REACHING FOR THE MOON" (Paramount/Artclass, 1917) Director: John Emerson Scenario: John Emerson and Anita Loos; camera: Victor Fleming and Sam Leanders; Settings: Wilfrid Buckland; 5 reels.


Accepting "When the Clouds Roll By" as being probably the best and most inventive of Doug's pre-swashbucklers, and "His Majesty the American" as being the biggest and liveliest, the whole Artclass and early UA group (covering 1917-1919) maintains a surprisingly high standard considering that Doug was using the same basic formula in each picture. In terms of production values and scope, the Artclass group represented a tremendous improvement over the 13 films that Fairbanks made for Triangle. Good as some of those were, as a group they compare with the Artclass films rather as the Chaplin Essanays compare with the Mutuals. "Reaching for the Moon" is a good, typical Artclass entry, and in many ways one of the better ones. Some of the sets seem unusually lavish for this kind of material however, and doubtless were "borrowed" from other productions.

Doug plays his typical All-American-Go-Getter, with just the right amount of breezy charm to prevent the character from becoming bombastic and a bore. Some of the credit for this perfect balance must go to the deft and light writing of Emerson and Loos; in certain earlier Triangles, without their scripting, Doug's screen character did occasionally get a little wearying. But here he's in fine fettle. The Buritanian spoofing doesn't really get going until the second half of the picture, and is finished off rather too abruptly perhaps; another reel wouldn't have hurt; however, all of it is delightful. Much of the comedy of frustration and lampooned melodramatics are exactly the things that Richard Lester has been coming up with in his recent movies, and specifically "Help", and can be seen here at their source. (To his credit, Lester has never claimed originality for his sight gags). The New York locales offer charming vistas of 1917 East Side, West Side and downtown, with the Plaza Hotel and 5th Avenue much in evidence. Charlie Stevens is equally much in evidence, playing a good guy (with moustache) and a bad guy (with beard), while von Stroheim, meticulously uniformed, can also be seen briefly. Not a major Fairbanks, it is nevertheless a delightful and thoroughly typical one. The print leaves a little to be desired, being rather on the soft side, but it is inadequate only in the closing scene where the wink and smile of the moon is obscured by the lack of definition. Doug's closing image of happy (and energetic) family life is not only charming, but should also give all
of us stodgy old married men a reminder that all is not lost!

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"REACHING FOR THE MOON" (United Artists, 1931) Directed by Edmund Goulding
Presented by Joseph M. Schenck; story by Edmund Goulding and Irving Berlin; Dialogue: Goulding and Elsie Janis; camera: Ray June and Robert Planck; music: Irving Berlin; musical director, Alfred Newman;
Sets: William Cameron Menzies; 9 reels.

When it first appeared, "Reaching for the Moon" disappointed the public. Made far more as a musical, it was reshaped and cut when the musical vogue appeared to be over. Almost all of the songs disappeared, and the title number remains only as theme music, and as the tail end of a dance number. Then too, with Fairbanks' big swashbucklers so fresh in the memory, its limited acrobatics seemed tame. Today however, when we can look back on the very early 30's with new perspective (and realise how fresh and cinematic this film is compared with so many of its contemporaries), and too when we judge Fairbanks by his whole career and not just by his specials of the 20's, it takes on a whole new set of values.

For one thing, Doug is back in his old stride again. He has all the zip and pep that he had in his early modern comedies; this "Reaching for the Moon" is a logical extension of the old, the passage of time being emphasised only by the fact that Doug is now a self-made millionaire instead of a super-optimist on the way to becoming one. Even his voice seems just right for this character -- it may not have the Colman ring that one would expect of a talkie D'Arlagon, but it has the perfect youthful ebullience of the millionaire that never grew up! The restrained acrobatics disappoint, true, but only because they're not really needed; Doug gives the film all the dynamics it needs in voice and gesture; the odd leaps and stunts are merely added punctuation. One would like to see Doug the athlete at his full powers or not at all, but this is a small quibble when the film has so much else to offer, quite apart from the aplomb of Doug and the beauty of Bebe Daniels. There's Edward Everett Horton in one of his funniest roles, getting away with blue jokes and outrageous immundoes right and left. There's a youthful Bing Crosby in a spirited number, and some beautiful but mannish girls who add to the dominance of off-beat sexual humor which is often as blatant as that in "What's New Pussyfoot", but is far funnier and more tasteful. And far from least, there are the spacious, modernistic sets by William Cameron Menzies, whose bizarre penthouses, ship interiors and non-moving seascapes add a deliberate touch of determined unreality that offsets the then very topical grim reality of the depression. Suicide and financial ruin are plot ingredients of "Reaching for the Moon", but Doug and Mr. Menzies prevent your ever taking them too seriously. But they do ask you to take the sentiment seriously. Audiences at the film's last exposure (some ten years ago at the 5th Avenue Cinema) did also laugh at some of the film's honest sentiment -- but Doug's own on-screen remark "You're laughing at me -- that's cruel and despicable!" soon put them in their place, as it will anyone here tonight so heartless as to laugh in the wrong place.

Many Fairbanks fanciers tend to look down their noses at this "Reaching for the Moon", and prefer to pretend it doesn't exist. I'm not one of them. If some inhuman destiny one day decreed that all but six Fairbanks films would have to be consumed by flames, this is certainly one I'd save at the expense of a "Robin Hood" or a "Don Q".

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