Although very much of a depression-era movie, this sensitive little tale is actually far more closely related to Borzage’s own silent “Seventh Heaven” — or to Milestone’s “Hallelujah I’m a Pum” — than to most of the hard-bitten films, especially those from Warners, about the depression years. Most of them, in retrospect, can be seen to have chucked out at the outset the very thing that made a film acceptable — the desperation and genuine pathos of the depression, and coming up with an optimistic “everything works out as long as one is loved” conclusion rather reminiscent of Griffith’s “Isn’t Life Wonderful”. But of course this philosophically sound, if rather impractical, solution, is still far to be preferred to the fantastic Cinderella endings tacked on to so many of the depression era movies, and even “My Man Godfrey” can’t be excused just because it was a comedy. Actually, “Heroes for Sale”, despite earlier contrivances, was one of the very few depression films not to pop out in its climax. In any case, “Man’s Castle” is not to be taken too seriously as a comment on its time; it could have been made in — and of — any period, and worked just as well, viz. the not dissimilar “Hoontide” made in the 40s. It’s a romanticised fable, with very definite separations of good and evil, and with beauty emerging from the slums via some of Joseph August’s most intimate camerawork. Some of the two-shots and closeups are quite stunning, although the weaknesses of the obvious back projection used in the early 30s does mar some scenes. The film is occasionally disjointed and shows signs of cutting prior to release, but our print tonight is complete and even includes that rather innocuous — though essential — bit where he seems so abrupt and unnecessary — nude bathing scene that is missing from most of the television prints.


Jack London’s original story, to which this bears almost no resemblance at all, is magnificent stuff and could have made a superb film — ideally perhaps by W.S. Van Dyke in his “Skimo” — ”Trader Horn” period. But this “Call of the Wild” is remarkably faithful to the general spirit of London, and the outdoor and boomtown scenes — and especially the sequence where Buck the dog has his overladen sled — are excellently done. The now-abandoned romantic structure of the plot curbs any attempt to identify with the friendship between Gable and Young, which is rather strong in the novel, making that Fox went to all the trouble of borrowing MGM’s big romantic idol just for this film. However, luckily the film went into release at exactly the same time as the Cabel-Harlow “China Seas” (in New York they were playing opposite each other, at the Rivoli and the Capitol) so the fans had little cause for complaint. Despite being fairly leisurely and tame on big action scenes, “Call of the Wild” is a well-crafted, thoroughly interesting film, with the rugged flavor one expects from Wellman in this period. It is also notable for some really marvellous tooth-grating villainy from Reginald Owen whose one aim through the film is “to put a bullet through the brain of that dog; an exquisite pleasure!”, and who is ably assisted by good old Charlie Stevens, who locks his lips and mutters an Indian abomination or two every time he looks at Loretta Young! The print is of the post-Code reissue version, hence Katherine DeVille’s total absence although high in the cast. She only had two scenes originally, an Cable’s two-timing mistress, whom he catches with LeRoy Mason. Since in the post-Code era, upright heroes like Cable didn’t have mistresses, both DeVille and Mason had to go — but the cuts are imperceptible.

EXTRA: For the benefit of those of you who’ll miss the complete film at the Trans Lux next week (though it may prove to be a trailer that will lure you away from Pearl White), the big “I’ll Sing You a Thousand Love Songs” production number from “Cain and Mabel” (1936, dir: Lloyd Bacon). The tunes and lyrics are vintage Warners; the set enormous; the girls beautiful; and the patter in the song’s “I was on the Opera” rap the original and the only one. Berkeley’s ingenuity is sadly lacking, and Bobby Connolly doesn’t come anywhere close. Marion Davies really contributes nothing to the number but her presence, and David Carlyle (later Robert Paige) is no Dick Powell — but it’s still a fun number even if it doesn’t seem to make much sense or have any continuity.