

Tuesday next, June 21st: Somerset Maugham's "THE NARROW CORNER" (1933), a minor and forgotten classic by Alfred E. Green, with Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Dudley Digges & Patricia Ellis; and Mervyn LeRoy's early talkie mixing gangsters and musical numbers - "BROADWAY BABIES" (1929) starring Alice White.

Tuesday June 14 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Tamings of the Shrew from the mid-30's

"IN PERSON" (Rko Radio, 1935) Directed by William A. Seiter; produced by Pandro S. Berman; screenplay by Allan Scott from an original story by Samuel Hopkins Adams; camera: Edward Cronjager; music director, Roy Webb; music and lyrics by Dorothy Fields and Oscar Levant; dances staged by Hermes Pan; 8 reels  
Starring Ginger Rogers, with George Brent, Alan Mowbray, Grant Mitchell, Samuel S. Hinds, Joan Breslau, Louis Mason, Spencer Charters, Lew Kelly, William B. Davidson, Bob McKenzie, Lee Shumway, Al Hill.

"In Person" probably suffers a little from coming right after "Top Hat", and thus having to be a "worthy" vehicle for Ginger Rogers. Accordingly it is blown up rather too much, given grade-A Pandro Berman production values that it doesn't really need, and slowed down a bit in the process. Could a reel and a half have been shaved off in the middle portions, it could have had much of the zip and sparkle that we saw Seiter giving to "Hot Saturday" a few weeks ago. However, it does have the usual Seiter taste and charm, and a very pleasing performance from Miss Rogers, with the added virtue that the padded sections appear in the first half of the film. Once it picks up steam, it never falters, and keeps its new stride through to the end. Since Miss Rogers plays a movie queen, some of the Hollywood flavor is quite amusing. A highlight is a nicely done sequence of a personal appearance at a hick-town movie theatre -- and on another occasion "Lovely to Look At" is quite correctly identified as coming from one of Miss R's "hit pictures". Stills of her throughout the film are all publicity shots from "Top Hat". There's a very odd "movie within a movie" episode, which comes to a curious climax that even Rko never duplicated in reality, and strangely enough Miss R's major Hollywood studio is identified as Supreme Pictures -- actually the name of a Republic subsidiary that made Westerns with Johnny Mack Brown and Bob Steele! The musical numbers are pleasing and quite elaborate, with Miss R's pleasing shape and legs well displayed in the climactic routine. If none of it comes off quite as it should, it is only because of the unnecessary blowing up of a trifle into a special, but it's a most pleasing and diverting little piece of escapism none-the-less, and far less preachy than most of the 30's films in which socialites and celebrities discovered the useful (if rarely convincing) axiom that money isn't everything.

- Intermission -

"MY MAN GODFREY" (Universal, 1936) Produced and directed by Gregory LaCava; screenplay by LaCava, Morris Ryskind and Eric Hatch from an original story by Eric Hatch; camera: Ted Tetzlaff; special effects, John Fulton; musical direction, Charles Previn; 9 reels  
With William Powell, Carole Lombard, Eugene Pallette, Althea Brady, Gail Patrick, Mischa Auer, Alan Mowbray, Jean Dixon, Robert Light, Pat Flaherty, Franklyn Pangbourne, Robert Perry, Selmer Jackson, Ernie Adams, David Horsley, Phyllis Crane, Grady Sutton, Jack Chefe, Eddie Fetherstone, Edward Gargan, James Flavin, Arthur Wanzer, Reginald Mason, Art Singley, Jane Wyman.

"My Man Godfrey" is one of those awkward films that seems to fluctuate in its values over the years. Very probably over-rated in 1936, when so much screen comedy seemed to have lost its bite, and when the many imitations it spawned (specifically Hal Roach's "Merrilly We Live") seemed inferior if for no other reason than that they couldn't match the casting of this original, it seemed to fall a little flat when seen during the 40's. By then the depression was immediate recent history, and the shams and evasions of "Godfrey" seemed all too apparent, especially when contrasted with the trenchant, wittier and generally more honest with which Preston Sturges was then regaling us. Thirty years later however, it appears in another light -- Hollywood films of the 30's tell us as much about the depression, and attitudes towards it, by their evasions as by their hard-hitting truths, and thus we need no longer be too critical of its artificial characters, none of whom really descend to being affected by the depression, or by the ludicrous cure-all climax. It's whimsy in its crazy comedy way just as Borzage's "Man's Castle" was whimsy in its romanticised poetic way. Too, "My Man Godfrey" is very much of an audience film; screened privately, it often seems to pall, but with an audience it always springs to life. The genuinely funny sequences seem hilarious, and the mildly funny lines provoke reactions greater than they probably deserve -- all of which of course is good comedy construction and good film-making. It must be close to a dozen years since "My Man Godfrey" was shown theatrically, so this revival seems due, if only to further eradicate memories of the weak David Niven-June Allyson remake of a few years ago.

Probably the most famous film of that uneven and erratic but always interesting director Gregory La Cava, "My Man Godfrey" was undoubtedly turned into the

comic milestone that it became by virtue of its cast. William Powell of course is flawless in the kind of role he was born to play; Eugene Pallette and Nischa Auer make the very utmost of their supporting roles, and lovely Gail Patrick manages to give real depth and style to what could have been merely a stereotype bitch role. Alice Brady is again rather irritating, but since in this period she was constantly being given roles - and dialogue - which could not be anything else, perhaps it is hardly her fault. Carole Lombard is something else again though, and is it heresy to suggest that she was extremely fortunate in having writers like Hecht & MacArthur, directors like Hawks and Wellman, and co-stars like Barrymore and March, to see her through her two best comedies, "20th Century" and "Nothing Sacred"? Somehow her performances only seem to survive in juxtaposition with other elements (as opposed for example to Harlow's performance in "Bombshell") and the sameness of her comedy style, and the repetition of mannerisms (as irritating as some of the unchecked earlier Deanna Durbin mannerisms) results in artificiality and boredom after a while. Certainly in "My Man Godfrey" Lombard has no chance against Powell, and rarely holds her own in a scene with Gail Patrick, despite the latter's unsympathetic role and more limited footage. Perhaps sentiment and nostalgia have caused us to over-rate Miss Lombard too long, elevating her to the goddess plane when she really belongs with such delightful but down-to-earth mortals as Kay Francis, Margaret Lindsay, Dorothy Wilson and Fay Wray -- still, let it be stressed, a very pleasant plane to be on! Regardless, "My Man Godfrey" is still a lush, handsome and thoroughly enjoyable comedy, if not quite as "significant" as we once thought!

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 The following notes on "CHINATOWN NIGHTS", screened last Sunday at the New Yorker, are printed for the record.

"CHINATOWN NIGHTS" (Paramount, 1929) Directed by William Wellman; screenplay by Ben Grauman Kohn and Oliver H.P. Garrett from the story "Tong War" by Samuel Ornitz; camera: Henry Gerrard; Associate producer, David O. Selznick; Released in silent and sound versions, the sound version (shown at the New Yorker) being only four minutes longer than the silent. Reels.  
 With Wallace Beery, Warner Oland, Florence Vidor, Jack Oakie, Jack McHugh, Tetsu Komai, Willie Fung, Tom London, Richard Cramer.

Coming midway between the total professionalism of Wellman's "Beggars of Life" (shown two weeks ago) and his all-talkie "The Public Enemy", "Chinatown Nights" is an interesting example of the hybrid film bred by the uneasy transition to sound. Actually it uses sound and dialogue fairly well, without sacrificing the visual style of the best silents. The camera moves, the sets are stylised and well-lit, there is no sense of staginess. It is certainly a far far better film by any standards (despite its thick-ear plot) than, for example, von Sternberg's contemporary early-talkie crime film, "Thunderbolt". But the mere existence of mechanical problems with sound prevent it all from really jelling. Quite a lot happens in the film, in terms of both action and drama, and the overall pacing is satisfactory. But individual dialogue scenes are often very awkwardly paced, and held too long for fadeouts. In at least one scene, Beery is in synch in his closeups, Florence Vidor hopelessly out of synch in her medium shots. Titles, understandably, are used to convey passages of time instead of other visual devices, and the inability to really edit sound results in voices having the same density whether they are in foreground or distant background, and the musical score - nicely atmospheric in the old tradition - tends to drone on, unbroken by grammatical stings or pauses, thus failing to make the most of the potential of many quite dramatic scenes. One is reminded right away that this is not life, but celluloid with an artificial track.

However, it's a colorful and gutsy little film with a number of real surprises in it. Beery and Oland, as a kind of Karloff/Lugosi of Chinatown gangsterdom, play together well and often with a surprising sense of humor. Florence Vidor is surprisingly good in a role that is a direct ancestor of Norma Shearer in "A Free Soul" and Miriam Hopkins in "The Story of Temple Drake" ("Sanctuary") - with just a faint echo of Gish in "Broken Blossoms" at one point. And for a film in which both "business" rivals get away with murder, and the heroine becomes a gangster's mistress and a drug addict, it's refreshing to note a climactic happy ending all around, with everybody coming out on top, and crime very definitely seeming to pay! Wellman's handling of the action, in stark black and whites (enhanced by the fine 35mm print we had) is both vigorous and interesting; one sequence of gangsters being mown down from ambush is an exact forerunner, in construction and composition, of the scene in "Public Enemy" in which Cagney and Eddie Woods are machine-gunned. Much of the film is clearly shot silent and later dubbed; camera speeds occasionally go astray; and on the cover of a handsome volume of his plays, Shakespeare's name is incredibly misspelled; but on the whole this lively little film has a lot of merit for the awkward period in which it was made, and one that has a lot of genuine Wellman flair to it. With "Wild Boys of the Road" coming up in a couple of weeks, it helps to fill in another key gap in our knowledge of his late silent-early talkie career.

William K. Everson

Good News: The print of MURDER AT THE VANITIES showing at the New Yorker later this month is complete, intact, and lots of fun. Try to catch it.