Tuesday next, August 16: Two films by Erich Pommer: "ST. MARTIN'S LANE" ("The Sidewalks of London", 1939) with Charles Laughton, Vivien Leigh, Rex Harrison; "VESSEL OF WRATH" ("The Beaucomber", 1936) with Charles Laughton, Robert Newton and Elsa Lanchester.

August 9, 1966
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
Two Biopics by Preston Sturges

"DIAMOND JIM" (Universal, 1935) Directed by Edward Sutherland; produced by Edmund Grainger; screenplay by Preston Sturges; adapted by Harry Clark and Doris Nalley from the book by Parker Forrell; Music: Franz Waxman; Camera: George Robinson; 10 reels.


Even though as romanticized as most screen biographies, "Diamond Jim" is quite one of the best examples of its genre, and one is inclined to forgive it much. Perhaps movie buffs tend to be generous with the non-show biz biographies anyway. Unlike the horridous and fictional biographies we've had on Pearl White, Texas Guinan, Buster Keaton, Jean Harlow et al, the biographies of men like Diamond Jim don't call for such wholesale legal doctoring as those of more recent figures, nor do they present a whole barrage of factual errors and falsifications which can be exposed only too clearly by recourse to any trade reference book. By actual count, "Diamond Jim" may well have as many inaccuracies as "The Buster Keaton Story" which sets new high impossible), but unlike that film, lacks right and sounds right, and does capture a genuine period flavor. Other than for a rather contrived encounter with John L. Sullivan, there is no cute name-dropping either. In any case, Edward Arnold (who repeated the role in "Tillian Russell") is so perfectly cast as Brady, and the foreword so sensibly disarms us by admitting to the rearrangement of the chronology of Brady's life, that we're more than prepared to bend over backwards in allowing for dramatic license in fitting Brady into the Edward Arnold mould -- which was also to receive the not dissimilar and equally dramatic General Sutter and Jim Fiske.

A handsome and elaborate production, "Diamond Jim" is one of the best dramatic features handled by comedy director Eddie Sutherland, and one of the few Edmund Grainger productions not to show too many signs of stock formula or cheap economies. It's a fast moving canvas of events, not lacking in comedy or action (a superbly cut train wreck is a marvellous thrill highlight), but dominated by the blend of "Big" drama and "Big" laughs that for a few years in the mid-thirties, was to be the hallmark of Edward Arnold "vehicles" while that excellent actor was at his peak. Incidentally, one of the most striking aspects of "Diamond Jim" is the fine score by Waxman, with its haunting and poignantly recurring romantic theme, and a stirring opening march which is likewise re-used throughout. Other than the careful writing of vignettes for supporting players, there is nothing in the screenplay startlingly prophetic of Sturges work to come, but as with such other early screenplays as "The Power of the Glory" it is good solid writing, doing a remarkable job of crowding a huge canvas into a tight and cohesive whole.

- Intermission -

"THE GREAT MOMENT" (Paramount, 1944) Written, produced and directed by Preston Sturges, based on "Triumph Over Pain" by Rene Fulop-Miller; camera: Victor Milner; Art Direction, Hans Dreier & Ernest Pngst; Music: Victor Young; Assistant Director, Edmund Bernard; 8 reels.


The least successful of Sturges' Paramount films of the early 40's, and the least known, "The Great Moment" has always been shunted aside as a mistake that is most charitably forgotten. Therefore it is rather rewarding to look
While the sometimes erratic Sturges can’t sidestep responsibility for the film, at the same time it is a matter of record – as well as being self-evident from the film itself – that Paramount were concerned about its marketability. A great deal of reshuffling and editing was done with the completed film, so that the structure is now awkward and inconclusive. And because Sturges was then a comedy name, one suspects that all of the comedy elements he shot were retained, while other material was dropped; this resulting in a final work in which comedy, though not dominating, tended to over-balance the serious aspects of the film rather more than originally.

Paramount’s indecision over the film were also reflected in the number of title changes the film went through ("Triumph Over Pain", "Great Without Glory" and others) before the rather uninspired present title was selected. Nevertheless, as with so many "troublesome" and/or mutilated films ("Lola Montez", "Across the Wide Missouri", "Red Badge of Courage"), "The Great Moment" stands the test of time rather well.

Comparison with "Monsieur Verdoux" is perhaps not inappropriate. Preston Sturges' comedy was always gay and luscious, never black; yet the juxtaposition of wild slapstick with the theme of a dedicated attempt to relieve pain by the development of face-saving results in a curious mood which was hardly likely to be understood or fully accepted in 1944, while today – thanks to films like "Dr. Strangelove" and "The Loved One" such a mood is comparatively commonplace.

The film also makes a rather strange and parallel companion piece to the British "The Magic Box". Both films tend to stress the personal pathos in the lives of Dr. Horton and Price-Darmee, and to be inecclusive about the value or results of their achievements. There is little emotional involvement with Dr. Horton at all, but this may be partially due to the new rather confusing construction, since the use of an unresolved flashback plays havoc with the sense of time. On the whole though, the individual elements are so good that one suspects that the original work, as Sturges completed it, must have been rather impressive. Certainly there are no signs of awkwardness or indecision within the film; the comedy sequences work well and are genuinely funny, the unpleasant aspects of dentistry are handled with taste but not via side-steppings, and the wholly dramatic episodes are often surprisingly moving. Visually the film is most impressive, with some extremely thoughtful compositional use, and some really beautifully designed studio "exterior" settings at a time when most such exteriors were over-gloppy and painfully phony. They are stylised rather than realistic here – almost in the way that the grey rocks and pale skies were unreal but impressionistically effective in "Frankenstein".

The climactic shot of the film is beautifully designed and a real breath-taker, but dramatically it arrives far too suddenly. It would be typical of Sturges to use such a carefully constructed shot almost as a throwaway, and it would be useful to know if this indeed was his original ending, or if he faked out and went on to something else. As it is, it has the look of being pounced on by some Paramount bright boy as being such an overpowering shot that it could solve all their problems, and give them an "instant" climax.

William K. Everson

George Galtzer, one of our members, is disposing of sundry film books, magazine and other material - and is also looking for specific items. I am attaching to the wall his listing – and anybody interested (his prices seem most reasonable) can write him directly at 1647 Popham Avenue, Bronx 10453, NY.

September-November schedules will be available here at our August 23rd showing, and will be mailed out in the normal way immediately thereafter. We found some really appetising and rare items in our recent pillaging of the London scene, and we can promise some really interesting surprises in the next Bulletin.