An early 30's evening with Mascot and Monogram

Tonight's program is the first of a short (and infrequent) series of evenings devoted to the smaller independent companies, specializing in "B" pictures. Far too many people assume that a "B" is inferior to an "A," in much the same way that a grade-Z Buffalo is a poor substitute for Buffalo. That a "B" western is the same whether it is a grade-Z Lash Leaue or a far more carefully made George O'Brien; and that any "B" picture is program fodder and no more.

With these shows we are not concerned with the occasional off-screen and even brilliant"B"s that do result occasionally - films like Mactab's "Jealousy" or Tomanova's "Two People." But rather with the overall field. We have chosen films that are entertaining, simple, that above all are typical. We certainly make no claims for these films being lost gems, but viewed in the right spirit we think you'll find them remarkably entertaining.

The "B" film of course has always been an invaluable training ground for actors, writers, directors, cameramen, allowing them far more freedom in many ways than the more rigidly controlled and policed bigger pictures, and also allowing them the luxury of making mistakes where it will do the least harm. Mascot films (and serials) for example taught film editor Joseph Lewis how to put films together; and in the forties he emerged as a first-rate director of tales, well-structured thrillers, William Castle, Carl Foreman, Edmund Masthay and others got their start at Monogram. And in a purely nostalgic sense, these smaller companies kept the old-timers and veterans of the silent screen busy. Their names were still known and carried prestige, even if not boxoffice; many a Monogram "B" made for $25,000 carried half-a-dozen stars who, just six years earlier, back in the twenties, were so big that no major studio would have dreamed of using more than two of them in one film.

Republic probably made the slickest and most streamlined of all the "B" films, and we'll get to them in a later program. But in a sense they are with us tonight, for Mascot was the forerunner of Republic.

Mascot's modus operandi was economy at all costs - and for a more detailed rundown on how they worked, we refer you to George Guelzic's long three-part article on the career of director Ford Beebe in "Sweeney Facts." But while Mascot (under Nat Levine) might cheat its directors and stars, and take fantastic short-cuts in production, they didn't cheat the exhibitors or the public. Mascot delivered a very marketable product. The films were cheap, but they moved. They often had unusually strong casts, workmanlike directors, and above all, good cameramen. Many of the films were shot at Universal or other studios, taking advantage of more elaborate facilities. Scripts were the weakest aspect of the Mascots, since the films were literally manufactured to supply a maximum of pre-determined and marketable qualities. But they had good exploitation values, and audiences - who saw them for the most part as supports to bigger films anyway - usually got their money's worth.

Monogram on the whole was less adventurous than Mascot, and less exploitation-minded. It knew that the majority of its films were B's, and was content to put them out as just so much program fodder, with the occasional more ambitious film - a "Jane Eyre" or a "Black Beauty" - thrown in. Production values were more polished than at Mascot; there was more studio work, less exterior shooting and more projection. The star rosters were less exciting, but scripts were often quite superior. Many of the quite obscure Monograms had really quite exceptionally strong stories. Certain producers and directors at Monogram - Scott Dunlap, William K. Howard, Herbert Brenon - took their craft really seriously, and even on small budgets, turned out superior products. But on the whole, both Monogram and Mascot maintained an even keel of workmanlike product which was designed for a set market, was known in advance to be cannibalized for bringing in X numbers of dollars, and (until Mascot became Republic, and Monogram invested in more ambitious projects) fairly reliably becoming Allied Artists) on the whole both companies continued to be known for their reliability within that market, rather than for any dramatic surprises.

There's a skill and a craft in turning out a workmanlike little film in a week or so on minimal budgets and with minimum facilities, and Monogram and Mascot excelled at it. Perhaps that skill will be a little more apparent in later programs. We'll show excerpts from some of the really cheap independent outfits (Ajax, Racquette, Purity, Mayfair) or perhaps devote some time to FRC, which tried hard to duplicate Monogram's success, but was just too cheap to make it. Until you've seen a bad FRC from the war years ("Hanger, Women at Work" .... "Submarine Base" .... "Jungle Siren") you've really no idea how excruciating six reels of boring, empty, grainy and talentless footage can really be!
"ONE FRIGHTENED NIGHT" (Mascot, 1935) Directed by Christy Cabanne
Screenplay by Helma Totoz from an original story by Stuart Palmer;
Camera: Ernest Miller, William Nobles; edited by Joseph H. Lewis; 6 reels
With Charlie Grapewin, Mary Carlisle, Arthur Hohl, Evelyn Knapp, Wallace Ford,
Regis Toomey, Hedda Hopper, Lucien Littlefield, Clarence Wilson, Fred Kelsey,
Raffaelo Ottiano, Adrian Morris.

Coming almost at the tail-end of the first big sound horror cycle, "One
Frightened Night" is a blatant amalgamation and plagiarisation of the overall
structure and specific plot elements of "The Cat and the Canary" and "The 13th
Guest". It has all of the standard clichés, a houseful of suspects, clutching
hands, lightning, flickering lights, and a booted killer. However, it is kept
alive by extremely slick and mobile camerawork, a good cast, and an unusually
strong musical score composed of old-time mysterious themes. (Most econom-
ized "B" pictures eschewed scores entirely, thus emphasising their usually
rather slow pacing; Mascot certainly rarely used music as consistently as they
do in this movie). Filmed at Universal, it also has the benefit of rather more
spectacular sets than Mascot could usually afford.

- Intermission -

"CRIMSON ROMANCE" (Mascot, 1934) Directed by David Howard
Screenplay by Mildred Krins & Doris Schroeder from a story by Al Martin and
Sherman Lowe; Camera: Ernest Miller; edited by Doris Drought; 7 reels
With Ben Lyon, Erich von Stroheim, Sari Maritza, James Bush, Hardie Albright,
Herman Bing, Roddi Rogers, Furnell Pratt, Jason Robards, Vince Barnett, Arthur
Clayton, Oscar Apfel, William von Erichsen, Crawford Kent, Brandon Hurst.

One of the more elaborate Mascot programmers, "Crimson Romance" benefits from
the use of Universal's standing European street sets, huge chunks of spectacular
stock footage bought from "Hell's Angels" (inexplicably, the Hughes people felt
that their film, now four years old, had shot its bolt, and were selling footage
that it quite promisingly!) and even from musical themes from the score of
"Sunrise". Even the plot itself is a none-too-subtle reshaping of "Hell's
Angels". Single lines of dialogue justify whole chunks of old footage, and
back projection welds one film to another quite neatly, even though Ben Lyon,
in both films, is frequently chasing himself through the clouds! Crashes are
either stock, or take place off-screen (with overlapping sound effects), but
apparently Mascot did borrow one or two planes for certain shots! Writers and
players alike treat it with seriousness and respect, and there can certainly be
no complaint on the cast level. Stroheim has a marvellous time as the German
villain, and dear old Herman Bing has some grand lines too. The print is a
little rocky in the first five minutes, but thereafter straightens itself out and
is quite acceptable.

"BEGGARS IN ERMINE" (Monogram, 1933, released 1934) Directed by Phil Rosen
Screenplay by Tristram Tupper from a story by Esther Lind Day;
Camera: Gilbert Warrenton; 7 reels
With Lionel Atwill, Henry B. Walthall, Betty Furness, Jameson Thomas, James
Bush, Astrid Allwyn, George Haynes, Stephan Gross, Sam Godfrey, Lee Phelps,
Clinton Lyle, Sidney DeGrey, Lloyd Ingraham, Gayle Kaye, Myrtle Stedman,
Gordon DeKahn.

"Beggars in Ermine" has the kind of strong, if novelettish, story that might
well have benefitted from bigger budget treatment at a major studio -- although
possibly on a more pretentious level, its charm and unexpected novelty might
well vanish. At times mildly Germanic and Fritz Langy, it is a distinctly
unusual little drama, and one that is extremely well served by its players --
especially Lionel Atwill and Henry B. Walthall, in a most moving supporting
portrayal. Phil Rosen's direction indicates that he probably wasn't aware of
what a promising property he'd been given; too often it is lazy and careless
traffic-cop direction -- even the death of the villainous crane operator in
the vat of steel ore being just thrown away - but fortunately the players
and the plot come to the film's rescue. All told, a film like this is quite
a credit to the then small and very young Monogram (which had evolved from
the silent independent Rayart company).

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