

Tuesday next, November 14th: THE NIGHT HAS EYES (1942) with James Mason, Mary Clare, Wilfrid Lawson, Joyce Howard; and TWENTY ONE DAYS (1939) with Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Banks, Robert Newton.

November 7 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Outdoor Adventure and Hokum in Technicolor: 30's and 40's

If one is historically-minded, tonight's two films illustrate any number of trends, not least the progression of sex from the hand-holding to the bedroom stage in the few years from the late 30's to the mid-40's, and the physical changes in Technicolor. Historically perhaps one should show them in their chronological order - but from a showmanship point of view, they work better the other way around -- and after all, one can trace history as effectively by going backwards as by going forwards. In any case, neither of these films were made with an eye to film history, but purely as escapist entertainment -- and on that level, both of them still work rather well.

"FRONTIER GAL" (Universal, 1945) Director: Charles Lamont; Written and produced by Michael Fessier and Ernest Pagano; Executive Producer, Howard Benedict; Musical director, Frank Skinner; Camera: George Robinson and Charles Boyle; Special Effects, John Fulton; 8 reels Technicolor
With Yvonne de Carlo, Rod Cameron, Andy Devine, Fuzzy Knight, Sheldon Leonard, Andrew Tombes, Beverly Simmons, Clara Blandick, Jan Wiley, Frank Lackteen, Claire Carleton, Eddie Dunn, Harold Goodwin, Jack Overman, Rex Lease, Jack Ingram, George Eldredge, Joseph Haworth, Joseph Bernard, Douglas Carter, Joan Fulton, Paul Bratti, Edward Howard, Jean Trent, Kerry Vaughn, Karen Handle, Cliff Lyons, William Desmond.

Since "Destry Rides Again" in 1939, there had been an increasing tendency (especially at Universal) to both take westerns less seriously, and to introduce more sex into them. "Frontier Gal" is very much of a light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek western (as emphasised by its European release title, "The Bride Wasn't Willing") and its heroine is a far cry from the innocent heroines of the thirties (viz Dorothy Lamour in "Her Jungle Love") insofar as familiarity with the facts of life is concerned. "Frontier Gal" was written and produced by the briefly prolific and then forgotten team of Fessier and Pagano, whose "San Diego I Love You" we showed some months ago. Instant critical and commercial success rather went to their heads, and they failed when they tried to make a formula out of the spontaneous charm and off-beat humor that had characterised their earlier work. "Frontier Gal" certainly displays one of their key flaws -- heavy-handed repetition, without variety, of an initially amusing gag; but otherwise the film - depending as it does more on action, color and splendid scenery than on writing skill - is far more successful than most of their later works.

Far too many "big" westerns seem frankly ashamed of their action sequences, and try to play them down. "Frontier Gal" happily has no such pretensions, and slams into its riding and fighting scenes as though it were just one of the humble Universal "B" westerns from which Rod Cameron and Fuzzy Knight had so recently graduated. The running inserts in the chase scenes are superbly shot, the fights have great vigor (and a lot of the "dirty" fighting tactics that were invading the westerns from the cycle of private eye movies) and there's an absolute minimum of back projection and studio "exteriors". The film has all the zip and pep of the "B" western, and it's only the occasional production niceties - Fulton's special effects in the cliff-hanging climax, dummies instead of doubles in a couple of chase scenes - that reveal the difference.

In the early 40's, in films like "Aloma of the South Seas", "North West Mounted Police" and "Virginia", Technicolor was still sufficiently uncommon for it to be a boxoffice asset in itself. There was still an excitement in seeing films just because they were in color. By the mid-40's however, Technicolor itself was no longer even a comparative novelty, and had no great boxoffice value. However, it was invaluable in adding prestige and superior production values to relatively inexpensive pictures, and as such was most effectively utilised by Universal. "Arabian Nights" for example betrays its innate cheapness when seen in black-and-white, but in color the billowing white tents and golden sands make it look like an extremely handsome and costly production. Likewise the magnificent exteriors in "Frontier Gal" give the film a real glossy and deluxe look in color, while in black-and-white it would be little more than a program western with a sense of humor. The color is generally more realistic and subdued (in the exteriors) than in the outdoor films of the 30's, but there is a tendency to reds, browns and yellows in the interiors which are sometimes a little harsh. Incidentally, the film was originally planned as a vehicle for Universal's "Arabian Nights" queen, Maria Montez. But, forgetting her own humble beginnings in Johnny Mack Brown oaters, Maria threw a temper tantrum and refused to do a Western - whereupon Universal, instead of arguing, gave the role to Yvonne de Carlo - and La Montez' roles rapidly dwindled in size and glamor in her remaining Universal pictures.

"HER JUNGLE LOVE" (Paramount, 1938) Directed by George Archainbaud; produced by George M. Arthur; Camera: Ray Rennahan, Dev Jennings; Special effects, Gordon Jennings; Musical Direction, Boris Morros; Songs by Frederick Hollander & Ralph Freed; Screenplay by Joseph M. March, Lillie Hayward and Eddie Welch from an original story by Curt Siodmak and Gerald Geraghty; in Technicolor; 8 reels

With Dorothy Lamour, Ray Milland, Lynne Overman, J. Carrol Naish, Jonathan Hale, Dorothy Howe (Virginia Vale), Archie Twitchell, Edward Earle, Bill Caldwell, Richard Denning, Sonny Shoree, Tony Urchell.

Following the Production Code crackdown in 1933, Hollywood retreated more and more into a Cinderella-like age of innocence, unparalleled even in the 1916-20 years when Bill Hart, Louise Glaum and Theda Bara were on hand to counterbalance Lillian Gish, Charles Ray and Mae Marsh. Lubitsch, Wyler, Ford, Wellman and all the other top directors were forced to compromise and to abide by all the tabus. So few genuinely honest and personal films were made in this period that they can almost be counted on the fingers -- "Nothing Sacred", "They Won't Forget", a very few others. For the rest, there were the tasteful and "safe" dramatic films like Dieterle's biographies, and the witty but compromised comedies like Lubitsch's "Desire". The things that Hollywood did best in these years were the escapist films -- the family comedies, the swashbucklers -- that could succeed on their own terms without having to compromise -- "The Prisoner of Zenda", "Gunga Din", and of course "Snow White", the Hardy films, and the various vehicles for such eternal virgins as Sonja Henie, Deanna Durbin, Shirley Temple and Dorothy Lamour. In 1939 Hollywood suddenly grew up again; Ford and Milestone symbolised the change with "Stagecoach", "Young Mr. Lincoln" and "Of Mice and Men"; W.C. Fields returned to films with his old acidity, and Sturges and Welles were just around the corner.

"Her Jungle Love" is as typical a product from this never-never-land period as one could hope to encounter. It's simple in the extreme -- devoid even of the typhoons and forest fires that were to enliven the later Lamour vehicles. Yet it's interesting that while Welles wrote the complex "Citizen Kane" single-handedly, no less than five writers labored over this "script" which could have been synopsis'd comfortably on the back of an envelope (and probably was). Not that we're knocking it -- in an era of Bergmans and Resnais, it's rather relaxing to sit back and not wonder what it's all about. It's leisurely and relaxed, and every cliché appears on cue. Ray Milland sets the pace for Jon Hall, Robert Preston and all the others who were later to explain to Dorothy what a kiss is, and Lynne Overman again appears from behind the palms to offer contemptuous comments on the proceedings. Only J. Carrol Naish -- blissfully hoping to eliminate the entire white race -- seems reasonably realistic in the milieu of the 60's. Dorothy swims and sings, hordes of hungry alligators gobble up one white man, set their sights on Dorothy, and then settle for a mass slaughter of all the islanders.

Despite its melodrama and moments of spectacle and horror, it's a relaxed and leisurely tale, and the cheerful old Technicolor -- three-color, but with an unrealistic emphasis on blues, greens and mixtures thereof -- is a joy to sit back and wallow in. The locales range from studio backlot to Catalina, though an ingenious special effect manages to fake up a new locale by juxtaposing cliffs from the California mainland with the beach on Catalina. Perhaps the most devastating proof of the passage of time however is the fact that one of the locations for the innocent Lamour-Milland frolics was reused by Roger Corman as the rendezvous-point for the motor cyclists' orgy in "Wild Angels"!

"Camp" is a stupid and meaningless word, and one applied too freely to old films, though happily its usage seems to be dying out. However, by any standards, "Her Jungle Love" is quite beyond camp. "White Savage" and "Cobra Woman" possibly ... but not "Her Jungle Love", which is far too well done a film within the boundaries of its own absurdities, and takes itself far too seriously. And what a pleasure to see and hear the sarong-clad Miss Lamour again. I recall that at the time, people of my age group tended to dismiss her as an unimportant upstart, who could never hope to be considered in the same breath -- or sigh -- as Madeleine Carroll, Dolores Costello or even Dorothy Sebastian. But now, our own senility and a distressing parade of Carroll Bakers and Ann Margrets seems almost to elevate Miss Lamour to the ranks of the immortals.

----- William K. Everson -----