

Tuesday next, June 3rd: "VENDETTA" (Britan, 1928): a rare example of the silent directorial and starring work of Henry Edwards, one of England's most popular stars; plus excerpts from "CALL OF THE SEA" (1929/30) his first talkie as a director/star; and an extremely rare transient "surprise" feature to be added.

May 27 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

LANG and FORD at REPUBLIC

"THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER" (Republic, 1950) Directed by Fritz Lang  
Produced by Howard Welsh; Associate Producer, Robert Peters; Scenario by Mel Dinelli from a novel by A.P. Herbert; Camera: Edward Cronjager;  
Music: George Antheil; Art Director, Bert Leven; 8 reels  
With: Louis Hayward, Lee Bowman, Jane Wyatt, Dorothy Patrick, Ann Shoemaker, Jody Gilbert, Peter Brocco, Howland Chamberlain, Margaret Seddon, Sarah Padden, Kathleen Freeman, Will Wright, Leslie Kimmell, Effie Laird.

Although his films of the 30's and early 40's had been well-spaced, Lang's career was even less active in the late forties, with only three films between autumn of 1944 and "The House by the River", released in the Spring of 1950. However, it marked the beginning of his most prolific Hollywood period - the first of ten films he was to make over a six year period. Most of these tended to be rather second-rate Lang; in these later years he repudiated the strong visual style of his earlier films, and claimed instead that the story should be everything, and the director's signature of little importance. However, this may well have been because his eyesight was failing badly, and of necessity he was forced into stories where dialogue and acting, rather than directorial style, carried most of the film. With the exception of the much under-rated "Moonfleet", "The House by the River" is about the last stand of the old Lang: stark, nightmarish, a "black" film not only in its content but also - literally - in its photographic style. Seldom has any film been so deliberately dark and underlit, and it must be well nigh impossible to see what is going on when the film is played on television! It has had no kind of theatrical distribution since the couple of years immediately following its release, and thus is one of the least familiar of Lang's Hollywood films. Our print, happily, is in pristine condition. Lang himself seems to have rather liked the film, despite the censorship problems it posed (outlined fully in Peter Bogdanovich's excellent paperback on Lang). I was involved, very marginally, in a proposed Lang film some six years back. It was to be based on a famous murder case and trial in Maine at the turn of the century. Its bleak, snowbound, coastal setting fascinated Lang, as did the case itself, which had many amazing twists and unexplained ambiguities, despite the "Guilty" verdict that was returned. He planned it as a documentary reconstruction, a la "Anatomy of a Murder", in that all the court records would be followed to the letter; but the setting and the characters involved were already suggesting legitimate "amplification" to him in the preliminary script talks. During these talks, he constantly referred back to "The House By the River" - a not dissimilar story - with obvious affection, and he also hoped to re-use Lee Bowman in the lead. Unfortunately the project came to nothing; the budget estimates were far too high for the backers to meet, and possibly Lang himself grew less enthusiastic when he realised the hardships involved (especially for a man of his age) in extended winter location shooting.

----- Intermission -----

"THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT" (Republic, 1953) Directed by John Ford; an Argoay film produced by Ford and Merian C. Cooper; scenario by Laurence Stallings from short stories by Irvin S. Cobb; Camera: Archie Stout; Art Director, Frank Hotaling; Assistant Director, Wingate Smith; Music: Victor Young; 9 reels  
With Charles Winger, Arleen Whelan, John Russell, Stepin Fetchit, Russell Simpson, Ludwig Stossel, Francis Ford, Paul Hurst, Mae Marsh, Dorothy Jordan, Mitchell Lewis, Grant Withers, Milburn Stone, Elzie Emanuel, Henry O'Neill, Slim Pickens, James Kirkwood, Jane Darwell, Ernest Whitman, Trevor Bardette, Hal Baylor, Eve March, Clarence Muse, Jack Pennick, Patrick Wayne, Ken Williams.

Sandwiched in between "The Quiet Man" and "Mogambo", "The Sun Shines Bright" - a casual remake of Ford's earlier Will Rogers film, "Judge Priest" - is a perfect example of the policy he pursued wherever possible of following a big commercial smash-hit with a "little" (and usually very personal) film that nobody could expect to match the boxoffice receipts of its immediate forerunner. Ford himself was very happy with the results, and at times has even proclaimed it to be his best picture; certainly he has always placed it alongside "The Wagonmaster" and (very surprisingly) "The Fugitive" as one of his best. One suspects that since it was obviously one of the most personal and least-interfered with of Ford's later films, he may have let personal satisfaction color his judgement a little. Make no mistake about it, it's a lovely film, a personal film, and to Ford devotees a joyous experience. But almost everything in it Ford had done better earlier. Winger's confrontation with the lynch mob for example, isn't as well done as Fonda's similar confrontation in "Young Mr. Lincoln", and the film as a whole doesn't evoke the period atmosphere as well as the beautiful "Steamboat Round the Bend" -- a film Ford has expressed particular dissatisfaction with due to "all the comedy" having been excised by studio cutters, although to me at least the film is so rich in humor and

memorable characters (Irvin S. Cobb, Stepin Fetchit, Francis Ford and especially Bertou Churchill as The New Moses) that any additional comedy would have upset the film's present tasteful balance of humor, pathos and drama.

"The Sun Shines Bright" is full of comedy and the kind of sentiment that only Ford (now that Borzage has gone) can pull off. There are memorable sequences, and the whole film is a kind of apotheosis of this brand of Fordian Americana. But as a unit, it somehow lacks the warmth and total conviction of earlier, similar Ford works, and I suspect one of the key reasons lies in the mechanics of Republic Studios. Geared to mass production of fairly unimportant films, Republic was an elaborate and efficient studio - for assembly line product - but it didn't really lend itself to the occasional off-beat prestige film: Welles' "Macbeth", the Hecht-MacArthur "Spectre of the Rose", even Machaty's curious little "Jealousy", all of which were made under difficulties. It's obvious that Ford wasn't empowered to throw up many sets, and had to use Republic's existing sets - their Southern mansion, their Western street, and so on. This results in ingenious short-cuts at times, but also in a kind of cheapness. For example, the lovely shots of the steamboat arriving in town - framed through the trees, the ladies with their parasols watching - just don't match with the shots of the docking, where Ford has to use a long lateral tracking shot as though from the deck of the boat, to suggest what he can't afford to stage. And while the images and compositions are Ford's all the way, there's something about the lab work which is cold too. Republic have their own lab - Consolidated - and they had worked out a nice formula for giving all their prints a slick, bright, streamlined timing and printing. This worked wonders on "B" pictures and westerns, giving them a gloss and a brightness which put them streets ahead of the similarly budgeted "B"s from Monogram which, in the 50's, were characterised by soft and grainy lab work. It hardly mattered that all Republic "B"s had the same visual "look", as it was a good "look"; but that sameness, when applied to a film like "The Sun Shines Bright", achieves a kind of mechanical perfection that works against it. Visually, "Steamboat Round the Bend" is far from perfect, with a lot of grain and soft-focus, but it has a romantic warmth which "The Sun Shines Bright" lacks. In the same way, Ford's "Rio Grande" for Republic is the least interesting, visually, of all of his Westerns; "The Quiet Man" was spared thanks to its extensive non-studio shooting, and its use of Technicolor.

It is unfair to carp perhaps, but it is also rare for a film as late as 1953, and as basically uncommercial as "The Sun Shines Bright", to have been made so exactly as its director wished. It's a pity that it couldn't have been the really definitive Ford film, but even as it is, together with 1950's "The Wagonmaster" it remains his best work of the past two decades. When released in New York (without a first-run), it was hurriedly and badly cut to second feature length, and released with some 25 minutes deleted, some chunks being taken out with so little finesse that whole sequences made no sense at all. Much later, Dan Talbot at the New Yorker did get a complete print for a single, brief showing, but apart from that, the complete print has had no New York exposure at all, other than for television where it has turned up in varying lengths. Tonight's print is a good one, and of the full original length.

William K. Everson

\*\* Erratum: "Spectre of the Rose" was of course a solo Ben Hecht production, and Charles MacArthur was not involved in any way.

As a post-script to the above, we can now announce that next week's "surprise" feature will be another apparently "lost" film -- 1936's "The Last Outlaw" (Rko Radio), never on tv and out of circulation because John Ford, who wrote the story, bought it back for a remake in the late 40's that never materialised. Not a western, although it has western ingredients, it stars Harry Carey, Hoot Gibson, Henry B. Walthall, Tom Tyler and Fred Scott. The players and Ford's really good story carry it; the direction (Christy Cabanne) merely makes one wish all the more that Ford had made it himself. But it's an unusual and certainly nostalgic film, and one that we think you'll enjoy. It'll come on at the end of the program next week (at approx. 9.00) and runs some 78 mins.