October 12, 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Off-beat Films from the early 30's

"THE MEANEST GAI IN TOWN" (RKO Radio, 1933; released 1934) Dir: Russell Mack
Executive Producer: Marian C. Cooper; Screenplay by Richard Schayer, Russell Mack and H.W. Hanemann from a story by Arthur Hornan; Camera, J.Roy Hunt; Music: Max Steiner; editor, James Morley; 6 reels

"LADIES' MAN" (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Lothar Mendes
Screenplay by Herman J. Mankiewicz from an original story by Rupert Hughes;
Camera: Victor Milner; 7 reels

I am covering both films in a joint program note because both are, in a sense, kindred films. They are certainly neither entertainment blockbusters nor artistic milestones, the kind of films that were never afforded much of a play on tv and have now all but disappeared, while they obviously are not of sufficient importance to warrant revivals by archives, museums or specialized theatres like the New Yorker. The Huff, therefore, is the only old-age home alas that they are ever likely to receive, and that in itself is almost sufficient justification for presenting them tonight. Both films also have other qualities in common -- they are off-beat and unpredictable; their principal fascination is that they are unknown films from which one expects nothing -- and so the surprises that they deliver are a real bonus. Thus it would be unfair to the films to write too much about them and rob them of the aces hidden up their nitrate sleeves.

From its credits, "The Meanest Gal in Town" (and incidentally the title is all but meaningless) is unprepossessing indeed. Yet it's a tart little comedy, often healthily dirty, and giving pleasantly large roles to people like Bert Kelton and James Gleason who usually find themselves relegated to supports. Frankly we looked at it initially as a rather unwelcome duty, on the theory that any unknown film had to be examined. Most such on this level tend to deserve their obscurity, and fail to meet the far-from-exacting standards required for a subsequent Huffian exposure. "The Meanest Gal in Town" proved to be a most enjoyable exception, though we suggest that you'll get more out of it if you don't approach it as a sleeper or rediscovered gem; merely expect nothing and sit back to see what it can deliver.

"Ladies' Man", with such players as Powell (at his most polished), Lombard and Francis - and an heiress/hercine who dashes off such casual lines as "I get three million dollars on my next birthday" - obviously has more going for it to begin with. It's a rather stiff film that is basically heavy - solidly so - and even rather unpleasant, but seems constantly about to veer into the Lubitschian wit of "Design for Living". Performances, and moments of bright dialogue, leave one uncertain as to its ultimate destination - and the climax is a piece of grand-scale grotesquerie worthy of the Jacques Prévert of "Lumière D'été" and "Les Amants de Verone". It's a decidedly pre-Code work, both in dialogue and story -- and certainly in some of the costuming too.

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