**HELLO SISTER** (Fox, 1938, rel: 1933) Directed by Erich von Stroheim under the title "Walking Down Broadway"; partially re-directed by Alfred Werker; adapted by Leonard Spiegelgass from the play by Damm Powell; Camera, James Wong Howe; 6 reels


Together with "Greed", "Hello Sister" is Stroheim's only thoroughly "modern" film and, with the exception of the apparently long-lost "The Devil's Passkey", the one that has proved the most elusive through the years. I don't want so much to discuss it as a film here as to talk about what happened to it, and conjecture on how much of what is left may - or may not - be Stroheim's. Contemporary criticism is of little value, since one leading critic and Stroheim partisan attacked the film as being "the greatest butchery perpetrated since that on Eisenstein's Mexican film" - this without having seen (at that time) a frame of "Hello Sister". Actually it might be pointed out that Alfred Werker was a pretty fair director too, and apart from the absurdity of some of the writing, some of the obviously re-shot scenes are in themselves quite good.

The mutilation of "Walking Down Broadway" was done for reasons quite different from those responsible for the cutting of earlier Stroheim films. It was brought in ahead of schedule, under budget, amicably, and was accompanied by all ready for release. As for the completed film, a few scenes are the work of von Stroheim. Then suddenly it became a kind of pumm in a power-struggle between two Fox executives, and the editing and re-shooting began. Publicity releases at the time named a number of directors as replacements on the new footage, including Alan Crossland.

The major change of course is in the minimizing of the Zasu Pitts role, and in the climax wherein originally she died. The silly sub-plot with theodynamic-stealing drunk is an entirely new addition (though events in Life on Street Next week make it curiously topical). But for the rest, it seems to be mainly a matter of cutting and adding things. One can perceive jump-cuts within scenes, odd words of dialogue are blocked out (including the doctor telling the girl that she is to become "a mother", even though the rest of that scene is quite explicit) and it's easy to see where weak comedy material has been inserted to relieve the grimness. For example, the time between the prostitute and the would-be seducer is raw stuff, shot and lit in the diffused style of "Greed", the "comedy" cutaways to the drunk below have an entirely different, bizarre style of photography, and were obviously shot much later. The story is basically trivial, even silly, is of course hardly a sign of tempering - dramatic and pictorial echoes of other Stroheim films, and particularly "Greed", for one to reject this as a Stroheim film. Both this film and "Greed" play out their strongest dramatic moments against the background of Christmas tinsel; at the opposite level of importance, both films use a sewer episode and a background for early courting scenes. The detail in so many scenes is unquestionably Stroheim: the grotesque dwarfs at Coney Island, the cripple entering the medical building, the detailed listing of medical names on a directory used only for a brief establishing shot. The sequence in the doctor's office, with the long tracking shot up to the painting of the Last Supper, combines the religious sincerity and moralistic tolerance which Stroheim had exhibited on so many occasions, and Zasu Pitts in particular ...... while obviously she suffers most from the re-editing, and her psychopathic role has been distorted and watered-down, at the same time she dominates every scene she is in. The framing of the shots, the restriction on the deliberate fingering of the interplay of smiles in which slight nuances of expression tell the words she is speaking - all of these are things that no director, re-shooting those scenes, would have done. Remember that no-one took Zasu Pitts seriously as an actress at that time, and that she was totally removed from "All Quiet on the Western Front" and her role re-shot, even though her performance was reportedly outstanding, merely because she was so type-cast as a comedienne. Look too at the typical Stroheim scene in the rain - the parting of the lovers against an extremely "busy" background, a large set filled with activity - extraneous. It is possible that such a scene were to have been re-shot, it would surely have been done far less elaborately, probably on a simple sidewalk set. After all, the extra money spent on the film was a mere $60,000 - a probably much inflated figure anyway, since it would include a proportionate share of the studio overhead for the period of shooting. In any case, "Walking Down Broadway" was not an important picture; it would have been
economically more feasible to scrap the film entirely than to re-shoot totally and STILL come up with a film so decidedly off-beat and uncommercial by 1933 standards. Like Batjac, the ad hadn't been so obtrusive (the drunk, the serial-like agitated music in a climax now played for melodrama instead of trepidation) and the deletions equally obvious. But MOST of the scenes and sets in the film are represented in the original book of master stills, bearing the VS code number. At a rough guess, and I stress the word guess, I would estimate that 60% of the footage is Stroheim's, even if not just as he shot it; but since the 5-real release version represents only about half of what Stroheim originally shot, and three-quarters of what he considered to be an acceptable release length, that 60% is obviously over-generous in some ways. But still, I think it is much more of a Stroheim film than we had been led to expect prior to the release; also I think it must be pretty plain than even in its totally untouched form, it would have been one of his lesser works. But only the more unreasoning Stroheim fanatics can totally reject it as a Stroheim work. Stroheim's own contemporary comments are, as always, a most unreliable guide to what happened. Cameramen seem to be among the most honest and unbiased documentarians of fact, and happily James Wong Howe is still with us, and a man of perception and retentive memory. Hopefully, I can show him the film this coming Summer and pin down from him just how much of the film Stroheim did make. Until then, at least it's good to have the film back with us. If we didn't know that Stroheim had anything to do with it, we'd be praising its many inventive touches and applauding the restraint placed on Jimmy Dunn (who so often got out of hand in that period through lack of direction) instead of trying to pick holes in it and blame it for not being a masterpiece. Or conversely, if we knew for a fact that Stroheim directed every foot, many of us would be lending it to the skies and explaining that it was a "misunderstood" masterwork. Film criticism can never be objective perhaps; but film history should be.

200 IN BUDAPEST (Fox, 1933) Directed by Rowland V. Lee; presented by Jesse Lasky Camera: Lee Garmes; screenplay by Dan Tetherch, Louise Long and Rowland V. Lee from a story by Melville Baker and John Kirland; edited by Harold Schuster; 8 reels With Loretta Young, Gene Raymond, O.P. Heggie, Wally Albright, Paul Fix, Ruth Warren, Russ Powell, Roy Stewart, Murray Kinnell, Frances Rich, Lucille Ward, Niles Welch, Tom Ricketts.

What a pleasure to confirm that this long-lost "classic" is in fact just that, and every bit as good as we hoped. However, I deliberately don't want to wax too enthusiastic about it in advance - like "Broken Blossoms," it is a very fragile film, a kind of fairy-story that can really exist only in the now far-away Europe of the early 30's. Like Shangri-La, one has to want to believe in it. There are clear distinctions between good and evil, and the "bad" Paul Fix is even given Wagnerian musical motifs and a physical makeup that, oddly, is rather like Hans von Twardowski's in "Caligari." It is over-scored, but that is quite justified in stressing its fairytale quality. The camerawork by Lee Garmes likewise has a mystical quality to it, while many individual shots look for all the world like illustrations from children's books. The shots of the troop of orphans trotting over a little bridge even seems to anticipate the lovely scene from Disney's "Snow White" of the seven dwarfs marching homeward over a rock bridge. The print is copied from a lovely 35mm toned original, which had many dark and blue scenes; this has made it a little difficult to time, and some shots are a shade too dark, but this is a minor complaint and one that can be rectified in future printings. The cast is uniformly fine, with Gene Raymond surprisingly effective, and O.P. Heggie almost as perfect as Henry B. Walthall would have been. Unquestionably, it is Lee's finest film. Adept and expert at imitating the style of others, he brought most of his films in the image of Lubitsch, Pomeroy or Whale, and perhaps because of that has been much underestimated. Here, he has nobody to imitate - not even Borzage - and the results stand out with he heart and blue scenes; this has made it a little difficult to copy others. My only complaint with the film is that it is a minor complaint and purely personal complaint with the film is that it is a minor complaint and one that can be rectified in future printings. For me, the whimsy and sentiment would have been quite enough. But Fox had a rather consistent policy of slapping sure fire-hoke and/or action climaxes to films which otherwise might seem a bit slow, so that the customers always went home happy. Most of the time they were probably right, and they're not necessarily wrong here. The climax is good, vivid, spectacular stuff .... but I can't help wishing that they'd reverted to form with a final "And they all lived happily ever after" farewell title.