Two Favorite Ladies in 1932

"THE MIDSHEPMAID" (Gaumont-British, 1932) Director: Albert de Courville Scenario by Standard Dickens from the London musical comedy by Len Hay and Clifford Greenbaum; Music by Noel Gay, lyrics by Clifford Grey; musical director Louis Levy; 6 reels

With Jessie Matthews, Basil Sydney, John Mills, Frederick Kerr, Nigel Bruce, George Zucco, Anthony Bushell, Claude Allister, A.W. Backcomb, Wilma Varne, Archie Glen, Joyce Kirby, Edwin Lawrence, Anthony Holles, John Turnbull.

Understandably (and perhaps even justifiably) "The Midshepmaid" was never released in the U.S., so this may well be its Western Hemisphere premiere. After a witty opening, featuring its lead Caroline's (Mills), honest Italian King Hall workers, the film becomes a perfect example of the practically plotless and utterly flimsy British "musical comedy" of the very early 30's - the kind of film that won few friends abroad, and were only savoured by the staunchest patriots at home. Luckily much better things were on the way, and in only a year or two, but with certain notable exceptions like "Sunshine Susie", the British musical of the very early talkie period was lagging far behind its Hollywood counterpart. (Realise with amazement that this was the same year as "Love Me Tonight")! Even allowing for the traditional light-weight quality of all Len Hay-Stephen King Hall works, this does seem bit too lacking in substance. But we offer no apologies for screening it, and indeed Jessie Mathews devotees should welcome the opportunity to fill in this gap in their knowledge of her career. Although she had made a couple of silents in the early 20's, she hadn't returned to films until 1931. This was only her 3rd talkie, well before she was established as a song and dance movie queen, and her musical talents though used, are neither taxed nor exploited. Malice Mills has never looked so young. Even her greatest character actor, Nigel Bruce and George Zucco for example, to cross swords later on in the Sherlock Holmes films at Fox and Universal. The print is of a slightly edited release version, and from musical indications on the couple of musical spots. My British sources inform me however that the numbers did not involve Miss Mathews and were of "inferior" quality, so judging from the standards set by the "superior" numbers that remain, we needn't fret too much!

"CALL HER SAVAGE" (Fox, 1932) Director: John Francis Dillon 8 reels


After her generally disappointing Paramount talkies, Clara Bow seems out to recapture her old image here with a vengeance. The plot throws in everything, from soap opera to sex, with wild parties and a Red Indian attack on route, and even uses the epic structural pattern a la Edna Ferber and several generations, so popular at that time. There's even a good deal of racial conflict for good measure, and Clara as the embodiment of the "sins of the fathers" through the ages; and since Fred Kohler was the one who got all the limin off to a flying start, his development is naturally very lively. (Incidentally, in a brief role at the beginning, backed up by stock footage from Walsh's "The Big Trail", Fred has the time of his life in a truly definitive Kohler role!) Clara has slimmed down to a really svelte figure from her Paramount days (and displays a good deal more of it than hitherto) and looks quite stunning, even against the competition from Thelma Todd! Beautifully mounted and photographed (by Lee Garmes), it has a bang-up opening and a lively finish, and in between so much happening one can forgive the looseness in the writing which was actually occasioned only by Walsh's script's sudden forays into mother love and self-sacrifice. But a wild Greenwich Village nightclub party (attended by "poets and radicals") gets us back in the groove again. None of this makes too much sense - with her accumulated wealth from a rich father and a rich husband, Clara seems forced on to the street with remarkable rapidity - and it seems highly unlikely that any one in that predicament would run across Walter Long and Bert Roach as her very first clients! Estelle Taylor repeats her "Street Scene" role, Miska Auer and Phillips from the Colligian, team up again, and even Clara's pet dog seems to have lascivious inclinations towards. Oddly enough, it all seemed much a throwback to the 20's than in 1932 it was regarded as old hat and didn't clik as it should, even though the chemistry seems so right. But today it's great fun, and a welcome reminder that Clara did get back on top before her fadeout. —WFR—

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