The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

With the exception of the tad and more conventional Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald musicals, much later in the thirties, the operetta saw only one concentrated period of production — and popularity — in the movies, and that was in the very early sound period. It was an ideal outlet for the new talkies; it could cash in on the sudden (though brief) surge of musicals, a natural follow-up; but more importantly, it could court the artificiality and romanticism that had been such an irresistible part of the silent screen, and that was now being suppressed because of the alleged unavailing “realism” of talkies. Exuberantly florid dialogue, colorful sets, songs that sprang from the action and didn’t need to be part of a monster revue rigidly confined to a stage, and of course color itself, all of these elements were bountifully exploited by the brief but surprisingly prolific light operatic cycle of 1929-31, which died only when the musical genre itself seemed to have shot its bolt. Few of these films — not even Lubitsch’s “The Love Parade” — lost their charm. Frotch and general abandon, to say nothing of their tuneful melodies, make these films which can still be enjoyed on their own rather special terms.

“THE LOTTERY BRIDES” (United Artists, 1930) Directed by Paul Stein
Music by Rudolph Frisell; scenario by Horace Jackson and Howard Emmett Rogers from the original by Henry Stothard; Camera, Ray June; Production Design, William Cameron Menzies; 8 reels

With Jeanette MacDonald, John Carroll, Zasu Pitts, Joe E. Brown, Robert Chisholm, Joseph Mankaslay, Harry Cribben, Carroll Nye.

Admittedly, Frisell’s work here doesn’t pose any serious competition to his more famous “Rose Marie” or “The Vagabond King”, and some of the lyrics are breath-exhausting tongue-twisters. The song that begins “Your eyes are like the Northern Lights in Springtime” provides an exceptional workout in lung-power. Moreover, Paul Stein was always a mediocrity, whether he worked here or in England, in silents or in sound, and he is incapable of the tongue-in-cheek grace that a film of the needs. The comedy is particularly heavy-handed, though I suppose that is indigenous to the genre; I saw a well-done straightforward revival of “The Desert Song” in London a couple of years ago, and the only thing that could have made the comedy “relief” unfumblous would have been for it to have been played by Dub Taylor. However, the whole cast goes at it with great gusto as though they were indeed a musical masterwork, it is elaborately staged, and visually always interesting. William Cameron Menzies’ sets for the Frozen North and a giant zeppekin may not be notable for their documentary accuracy, but they are pictorial delights. Originally the climactic Northern Lights played on in color, but even in black-and-white they make for an effective finale.

“GOLDEN DAW” (Warners Brothers, 1930) Directed by Ray Enright
Scenario and story: Otto Harbach, Oscar Hammerstein 2nd.; scenario by Walter Anthony; Camera: Dev Jennings and Frank Good; 8 reels

With Walter Woolf (King), Vivienne Segal, Noah Beery, Lupino Lane, Alice Geiteit, Dick Henderson, Sojin, Otto Matiesen, Marion Byron, Lee Moran, Nigel de Brulier, Nina Quartero, Julienne Johnson, Edward Hartnell, Nick de Ruiz.

Originally “Golden Dawn” was in Technicolor, and b/w prints today from the old negs, or dupes thereof, have a pale and washed-out quality. However, visual elegance was never (presumably) a strongpoint of this film, and it’s only necessary that you hear it, although that is no guarantee that you will believe it. Its plot is an incredible amalgamation of “Aloma of the South Seas”, “Bird of Paradise” and Louise Glau’s “The Leopard Woman”, and action-director Ray Enright treats it with one brick in the wall, and the running time that he applied to his Rainbow Tin film. The very first title refers to the necessity of “keeping the natives in peaceful subjection”, and from there on in the cause of racial equality is dealt such an unwinding death-blows that the NAACP could permanently retire “The Birth of a Nation” as their perennial whipping-boy, and take up the cudgels against this one instead! Noah Beery, in magnificent voice (and the blackest of black-face) is superb in one of his most villain roles, literally a sound extension of Walter Long’s One brick in the wall, and the running time that he applied to his Rainbow Tin film. The very first title refers to the necessity of “keeping the natives in peaceful subjection”, and from there on in the cause of racial equality is dealt such an unwinding death-blows that the NAACP could permanently retire “The Birth of a Nation” as their perennial whipping-boy, and take up the cudgels against this one instead! Noah Beery, in magnificent voice (and the blackest of black-face) is superb in one of his most villain roles, literally a sound extension of Walter Long’s One brick in the wall, and the running time that he applied to his Rainbow Tin film.

"Golden Dawn" is justifiably forgotten, but we think you’ll get a good deal of uninhibited pleasure from this "rediscovery" — even though it is ghoulish grave-robbing rather than culturally high-minded film preservation.

— Wm. K. Everson