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Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Irving Cummings, Mary Astor and crime; two Fox films of 1928

ROMANCE OF THE UNDERWORLD (Fox, 1928) Directed by Irving Cummings; scenario by Douglas Doty and Sidney Lanfield from the 1911 play of the same title by Paul Armstrong; Camera, Conrad Wells; editor, Frank Hull; 7 reels
With Mary Astor, Ben Bard, John Bolea, Robert Elliott, Oscar Apfel, Helen Lynch, William H. Toker.

Fox's little-heralded and now little-remembered programmers of the late 20's prove on re-examination to be an unusually enterprising and well-made group of films. Some of them, like "Through Different Eyes", were used as a kind of "safe" testing ground for trying out directors and stars in sound. With no great investment involved, and their release in both silent and sound form, they posed little risk of loss of money or reputations - if they didn't pan out, and thus they were sometimes far more genuinely experimental in technique than many of the bigger sound films of the day. "Romance of the Underworld" was released with a sound track (now lost) that was limited to music, effects, and one song, although the telling of much of the story via dialogue, and the predominance of closeups, suggests that it may have originally been scripted with full sound in mind. If its plot seems a little old-fashioned, it's probably because it's based on a pre-gangster-era play by Paul Armstrong - whose early "The Heart of a Thief" likewise reached the screen belatedly, and somewhat jazzed-up, as Raymond Griffith's "Paths to Paradise". "Romance of the Underworld", for all of its lack of real action, is fast-paced and with a great deal of moving camerawork. In fact it's an infinitely superior production to many of Cummings' early and more elaborate talkies. The titles are sometimes quite snappy, the morality is decidedly bizarre (especially the code of ethics provided by Robert Elliott, something of an exact opposite of Orson Welles in "Touch of Evil") and Mary Astor is young and exceptionally lovely.

-- intermission --

DRESSED TO KILL (Fox, 1928) Directed by Irving Cummings; scenario by Howard Estabrook, William H. Cuselmann and Irving Cummings; Camera, Conrad Wells; editor, Frank Hull; 7 reels

Made some seven months before "Romance of the Underworld", and with no thought of using sound in any form "Dressed to Kill" is an even better production than "Romance of the Underworld". It seems clearly influenced by von Sternberg's "Underworld", and even goes out of its way to "visualise" sound, as in the interesting sequence of the stool-pigeon/walter's murder. Like "Underworld" (and many other early gangster films of the mid-20's) it is quite sentimental and in some ways an updating of the old Good Badman westerns of Bill Hart. It is beautifully and imaginatively photographed, and Mary Astor - caught in some quite stunning closeups - has never looked more attractive.

Wm. K. Eversoh