"SHOW BOAT" (Universal, 1936) Directed by James Whale
Produced by Carl Laemmle jr; screenplay by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern from the novel by Edna Ferber; music and lyrics by Hammerstein and Kern; cameraman: John Fessell; special effects, John Fulton.


Unfortunately I never saw the 1929 version of "SHOW BOAT" with Laura LaPlante, Joseph Schildkraut and Alva Rubens – and having missed any original version of a remake film automatically puts me in the same position as the ashamed Oriental who must apologize for having only daughters and no sons, children. Since it was directed by Harry Pollard, who did such a bang-up job on "Mama Tom's Cabin" one can only assume that it was equally a picture. Quite certainly Ossie Harlam must have been a superb Captain Andy.

Comparison between this 1936 version and the later MGM Technicolor remake with Ava Gardner, Howard Keel, Kathryn Grayson and Joe E. Brown is perhaps pointless. MGM gave it a less gauzy, more romanticist flavor and perhaps wisely – a far tidier story-line which confined itself to one period. However, it offered somewhat less than the Universal version, which even compared with the original Hammerstein and Kern music not in the original show. Looking at this "Show Boat" more as a James Whale film than as a musical, it is perhaps a little disappointing. (This is probably a purely personal viewpoint, since I tend to be far more interested in the Whale who gave us "Bride of Frankenstein", "Kiss Before the Mirror" and "One More River" than in Kern and Ferber, heresy though this may be!) It is done with tremendous care, polish, and Whale's usual impeccable taste, but somehow it lacks the imagination one looks forward to in a Whale movie. There are hints of it in the "Old Man River" number, quite beautifully performed. Too much, though, of that sort of highly stylized costume set-ups that are Whale at his best. But for the most part, this "Show Boat" is a big, glossy, "safe" production – perhaps not unusual in a year noted for such other big prestige films as "Romeo and Juliet", "Rose Marie" (coincidentally that had also been filmed last in 1929, and has been remade once since), "The Good Earth", "The Great Ziegfeld" and "Swing Time". Perhaps in a way it is lucky that "Show Boat" was such a "safe" production; it went into release about a month after James Cagney's costly and old-fashioned "Gutter's Gold" which was such a commercial failure that it could well have worked better than Whale's fantastically successful "Show Boat" saved the day.

In terms of music, the film is generous – and especially in the third – quite breath-taking in the way one hit song follows another with scarcely a pause for breath. Whenever there's a full dramatically, there's always another well-remembered song around the corner to liven things up again. Helen Morgan's "Bill" comes very late in the film – which is perhaps just as well, as it would be impossible to top it. Both she and Robeson are so good in their roles, and this number is so completely a showcase for them that it is difficult to finish from the latter portions of the film. The final reel, admittedly, is a little hard to take – not least because all sense of time is lost. Costuming and dialogue indicate (although the film is hazy about dates) that the story starts in the post Civil-War period; it winds up on Broadway in the thirties, and no matter how you slice it, there must be thirty years unaccounted for somewhere! This last third is lugubrious Edna Ferber at her worst, wallowing in that love-over-the-decades sentiment that she loves so well, and with which she was also quite generous in her 1933 film, "The Heiress". Competition in 1936 is easier to take with Edward Arnold than via an unconvincingly aged Allan Jones. However, the basic flaws of "Show Boat" – specifically a story-line that constantly slackens in interest – have been present in all versions, stage and screen. They are anticipated by now, and thus never quite as weak as we expect. "Show Boat" otherwise is a production guaranteed to please since it delivers precisely what is wanted: all the songs, a sprawling canvas of a story, big scenes, handsome sets, spectacular crowds and a fine cast, which is a pleasure to see and listen to. Charles Winninger gives one of his best performances – especially in the virtuoso scene where he acts out a melodrama, although this is the part of the film most affected by the physical ravages of time. The photography, with its stress on long-held full closeups, is quite fine though again not too well served by this print, copied in Europe from a rather shrunken and worn original. The many night-shots, use of process plates and the over-all soft-focus technique so prevalent in the mid-30's further added to the copying problems. However, it has been so many years since "Show Boat" was last seen that we're sure you'll make allowances for deficiencies which – after a while – aren't that noticeable anyway. --- WILLIAM R. EVANS ---

Thanks are extended to Mr. Binaldi of MGM for permission to show this film.