THE NEW SCHOOL ASPECTS OF THE 30s Program 2: October 13 '67

POLITICAL COMMENT: SATIRE & MELODRAMA


Without being either a masterpiece or a milestone, "The Dark Horse" is a pungent and fast-moving political satire, the more notable because it was made in an election year and didn't hesitate to kid politics for being corrupt, and the public for being saps. It pre-dates the Preston Sturges satires, many of them wholly or partially political, by almost a decade, and unlike Sturges, doesn't soften its ultimate punch by whimsy and deliberate fantasy. On the other hand, one can't judge "The Dark Horse" by the same standards that one would apply to a Sturges film. Delightful and uninhibited as it seems in retrospect, it was after all only a programmer with no lofty aims, and when--as happens towards the end--the edge of political satire is blunted in favor of story-line and more conventional comedy material, one can't really blame it for not sticking to its guns as fervently as a "Nothing Sacred" or "The Front Page". But for a comparatively minor production it carries quite a punch and doesn't concern itself with whose nose it tweak. Like all good satire, it is strikingly near the truth, as a casual perusal of recent newspaper will show. Alfred E. Green, a versatile film director (perhaps more in his element with the gentler Mary Pickford and Colleen Moore vehicles he had made in the 20's) keeps things moving along quickly, aided by the flawless type casting of all the familiar Warner faces, including of course Berton Churchill in his element as a blustering and phoney politician. In the lead, Warren William, constantly telling us that the character shouldn't be taken seriously, could only have been bettered by Barrymore, who would have told us that the player playing the character shouldn't be taken seriously either. Bette Davis, in her tenth film (her biggest role to date, and next to "The Man Who Paid God", her most important; is so good that one wonders anew why she was so indifferent (and so badly photographed) in some of the films that immediately followed; "Fashions of 1934" in particular.


A little known film even in its day, and never revived theatrically or on TV, by the film museums, "Massacre" was probably the best talkie of director Alan Crosland, whose career was cut short by death in an automobile accident. (Although his sound films showed an easy and confident transition to talkies, he never regained the tremendous prestige that had been his in the late 20's as the director of such lavish Barrymore vehicles as "Don Juan", and Jolson's "The Jazz Singer"). The story by NYU's Robert Gesner is perhaps more than a little influenced in its basic structure by "IT AM a Fugitive From a Chain Gang". As in "Heroes for Sale" (to be seen later in the season) the framework is melodramatic, and as in Fritz Lang's "You Only Live Once" the scale of social comment are loaded--perhaps overloaded. (It does seem unlikely that all of the white Indian Affairs officers were corrupt thieves, lechers and drug addicts) But since the story hardly claims documentary characteristics, and since, like Zane Grey's "The Vanishing American" the story is a darned good one, the social overtones come as something as a bonus, and work far better than in Michael Curtiz' welding of melodrama and social comment in "Mountain Justice". There is some fine camerawork, striking images, much casual humor (a colored valet constantly makes cracks about Indians, whom he considers his social inferiors), powerfully-done mob scenes, and unusually well-chosen locations, ranging from nearby Chatsworth to that stark solitary tree in the middle of a vast plain than DeMille (in "The Plainsman") and others have used to excellent effect.

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