ERICH FOLLMER

Essentially a producer, Follmer was one of the key figures of the silent German film. Apart from his outstanding films in that country, he made many notable silent and sound American films, and was also active in Britain in the 30's.

"VESSSEL OF BRATH" (U.S. title: "The Beachcomber") Britain, 1938
A Fomer-Leaughton-Mayflower Production for Paramount release; Produced and directed by Follmer; screenplay by Darlott Cormack from the novel by Somerset Maugham; Camera: Jules Kruger; Music: Ruin Mathiesen; Editor: Robert Harmer.

"Vessel of Brath" calls to mind two other quite similar films - "The Tuttles of Tahiti", another Leaughton vehicle, and - even more of a parallel - "The African Queen". I haven't read Maugham's original but I suspect that this adaptation follows it both faithfully and reverently. It has the occasional stiff look of the too literal translation from one medium to another, and certainly - to its credit - it overlooks the many opportunities for "showmanship" in the distorting drama into Technicolor, something that the Technicolor remake certainly did not overlook. But despite being a little "difficult" at first, like many a good book, it is an endearing film that soon begins to flow easily and rewardingly. The direction by Follmer, who rarely directed personally, is a little old-fashioned, but not obstinately so. It starts with an iris, and soon afterwards there is a wild chase down a native street which in terms of logic, time lapse and distance, is all wrong. It is shot (and edited) as though it was a silent film in which time could be suspended or prolonged by the insertion of a tilt. But thereafter "technique" relaxes a little. The film is neither old-fashioned nor modern; it lets the story and the players take over almost completely, and under the ensuing circumstances this seems by far the wisest course. On the whole, it's a rather lovely, lazy cigarette of a film, less showy and dramatic than the Fomer-Leaughton "St. Martin's Lane", but perhaps more satisfying.

Robert Newton, here in a key supporting role, appropriately played the Leaughton role in the remake, while Donald Sinden effectively took his part. Glynnis Johns however was hardly as felicitously recast in the Eisa Lanchester role, though she managed to squirm rather nicely when about to be tremped by elephants - an episode of sensationism conspicuously absent from this version.

LEWIS MILSTONE

Starting out in silents as a Rin-Tin-Tin editor, Milestone soon built a directorial reputation as a secondary Lubitsch. His real forte however was the more rigorous end of the sound film, "The Front Page", "All Quiet on the Western Front", "After the Front Page", "Of Mice and Men". Although there was no thematic consistency to his work, he did employ a recognisable visual style, as apparent in "Rain" as in a musical like "Hallelujah I'm a Bum".

"RAIN" (United Artists, 1932) Directed by Lewis Milestone.

There have been three versions of "Rain" to date; a silent and curiously Carl Drayer-esque Gloria Swanson-Lionel Barrymore version made by Regul Valsh, and in the 50's a Rita Hayworth remake hampered by catering to Technicolor, 3-D, a star image, musical numbers, and a Production Code that still demanded evasions and compromises. Since "Rain" depends so much on its stark and theatrical dialogue, it follows that this early talkie version, despite minor flaws, is the most definitive of the movie adaptations to date. Crawford's at the time criticised and controversial performance holds up rather well, and Huston of course is an ideal Davidson. Pictorially, Milestone does everything he can to make us forget its stage origins, even though his own trademarks - and particularly those long parallel tracking shots - constantly remind us that this is not reality but a movie, and a Milestone movie at that. It's odd that three versions of a story that merits so little variation of interpretation should all have such widely divergent pictorial and directorial styles — but all in all, this 1932 version is the most powerful of the trio.

- M. K. EVERSON