"THE STAR WITNESS" (Warner Brothers, 1931) Director: William Wellman Story and scenario: Lucien Hubbard; Camera: James Van Trees With Walter Huston, Chic Sale, Grant Mitchell, Sally Egan, Frances Starr, Ralph Ince, Nat Pendleton, Dickie Moore, Eddie Nugent, Tom Dugan Robert Elliott, Noel Madison, George Ernest, Russell Hopton, Allan Lane

After four weeks of the "Fancy", we could hardly find a more thoroughly representative transition to the "Plain" than these two early films from Warner Brothers. One of five arranged melodramas ("The Public Enemy" being the best and most famous) that director Wellman turned out for Warners in 1931, "The Star Witness" is very much a part of that curiously Fascistic off-shoot of the gangster cycle, an offshoot that included DeMille's "This Day and Age", LaCava's "Gabriel Over The White House" and Wellman's own "The President Vanishes". In the light of contemporary lawlessness and the increasingly ineffectual attempts to combat it, the ruthless "The end justifies the means" attitude of the 30's on crime has an almost justifiable acceptance. Less easy to accept is the equating of law enforcement with support of an almost McCarthyist vehemence, and the suggestion that law-breakers and hoodlums are automatically Greeks, Itailians or anything but loyal Americans. (This despite such venerable Yankees as Ralph Ince and Nat Pendleton among the gangsters!). Chic Sale's heated little speeches about "dirty furiners" may well raise a few eyebrows today, but it was a party of the 30's, and we should be grateful that certain films did record that attitude honestly - the more honestly in fact for presenting it without comment as an acceptable fact of life. For the rest, the film is a typical 'hard boiled' Wellman melodrama, its treatment generally superior to a script that does have a few holes in it, most notably the ineptitude of a dumb cop which is used to launch two plot crises. The action is taut and vicious, one beating scene particularly savage, and one almost sympathises with gangster Ince in the face of D.A. Huston's oft-repeated determination to see him burn in the electric chair, not so much for his crimes as an example to other criminals! Chic Sale incorporates a lot of his stage act into the plot - quite neatly and logically as it happens - and, patriotic excesses apart, some of it, and especially the closing scene, is quite touching.


It's surprising how soon after his success as "Little Caesar" (1931) Robinson was already kidding his own speciality, perhaps the more surprising when one takes time to consider how relatively few gangster roles he actually played. There are a handful at most, with the majority of them concentrated in the 40's and 50's ("Key Largo", "Hill onPRIO"", "Black Tuesday"). Robinson's involvement in movie crime was, despite his fond to the contrary, far more on the side of law and order. "Little Giant", which bears no relation to the comedy property of the same title filmed two or three times by Universal, is very much in the Damon Runyon mould and is actually far more authentic Runyon than many of the films officially based on Runyon tales. (It certainly has far more of the spirit of Runyon's "Bitch Minds the Baby" then did the slapstick film adapted from it). The theme of the tough guy in society has never been a really productive one either for crime or for comedy, and too often the plotting is heavy-handed and obvious and the dialogue labored. Despite some of this criticism can be levelled at "Little Giant", and it is never quite as smart as it thinks it is, but it still has so much going for it that it's always good and sprightly fun. For one thing of course there's the cast: Robinson delivering his lines with aplomb, Mary Astor sereneley lovely, Helen Vinson as enjoyably bitchy as always, and Berton Churchil ill clustering and cajoling in his time-honored manner. The gangster cliches are mixed with remarkable toughness and are well done sequence where Robinson ditches his former mistress. Being a pre-Codr movie, there are the usual cracks about racial minorities, dope addicts and homosexuals, with modern art added to the list of items to be debunked. There's a whole of a wild party, some inside gags (both relating to "The Public Enemy"), rare on the screen prior to 1940, and the Vitaphone orchestra is in there saving away at recognisable themes from "Blessed Event", "One Way Passage" and other then current Warner movies. It's typical, snappy, loud and fast, and while it's neither a major Robinson nor a major Del Ruth it's one that neither of them should dismiss lightly. —— WM. K. EVERSON ———