
The big "disaster" spectacle, such a Hollywood specialty in the 20's and 30's, is now sadly a thing of the past. The real reason of course is that production costs (at least for films done with the care and realism of those of yore) would today be prohibitive; the "official" reason is that such big "disasters" are associated by the public with the adolescent Hollywood of yesteryear, and we in our wiser and more outgrown such nonsense. In any event, tonight's program is a detailed, noisy (and possibly a bit exhausting!) round-up of such classic special effects work of the past, running the gamut of all the techniques from full-scale sets to miniatures, and all the involved mattes and glass shots that go in between. "The Hurricane" is one of the best examples of these disaster films because, unlike so many of them, it doesn't just keep you twiddling your thumbs for ninety minutes, giving you your money's worth in the last reel only. It is a full-rate film throughout, with continuous action, a solid story, a really hand-picked cast, and all the attributes of the "big" Hollywood product of the thirties, including some outstanding photography and a beautiful score by Newman (which, incidentally, had its roots in the much earlier "Mr. Robinson Crusoe" with Fairbanks sr., also scored by Newman). As a John Ford production, coming mid-way between "The Prisoner of Shark Island" (to be shown next season) and "Stagecoach", it is perhaps a trifle more discursive and less personal than usual, perhaps because of the omnipresence of producer Goldwyn. Ford filmed for Goldwyn, "Arrowmith", had the same look to it). There's no mistaking that it's a Ford film; the images are his, the emotions are his, and regardless of the original story, characters (the drunken doctor, the sadistic prison guard) creep in from earlier - and later - Ford works. But the sentiment is soberly restrained, rough-house humor totally absent. Ford himself has never expressed any great pleasure in the film and has indicated that to him it was just a job of work, done as well as he knew how. (Possibly if the islanders had been Apaches, he might have been less restrained in his sentiment - and it's still a top-flight Ford even if, inevitably, much of the credit must be given to James Basevi who staged the hurricane sequence that occupies approximately the last third of the movie. This is magnificent stuff, not only beautifully created, but incredibly skilful in its cutting between miniature and full-scale set. It's also marvellously representative of Hollywood in the 30's: with one of the greatest space sequence ever filmed, they still have to try to top themselves by cramming in the incident - such as the rather unlikely birth of a baby in a canoe that is being hit by either a wave or the very heart of the holocaust! Only in the rather excessive use of back projection, a standard 30's technique, does the film date at all in a technical sense, and even these shots are well integrated with stylish studio sets, just as these sets integrate convincingly with actual South Seas locations and the more handy ones of Catalina Island. Quite incidentally, it's odd that the opening sequence - a framing device leading to a flashback - is stolen in toto from Michael Powell's British "The Edge of the World", made much earlier that same year, and which Goldwyn's writers probably assumed was too obscure to get any kind of distribution over here.

Preceding "The Hurricane", and in the order listed, will be a one-reel version of Alan Crosland's 1928 "Old San Francisco", in which Dolores Costello's prayers bring on the earthquake in order to save her from white slavery at the hands of Orientals; the destruction of New York by tidal wave in 1933's "Deluge" (although that is now a lost film, and our excerpt is actually from a much later "39" SOS Tidal Wave"), which incorporated much stock footage from the original film); "San Francisco" (1936, director W.S. Van Dyke) with Gable, Tracy, Jeanette MacDonald and Jack Holt, and some brilliant Eisenstein-inspired editing along with its spectacle; "Suez" (1938, director Allan Dwan) with its impressive desert sirocco and Tyrone Power in the first of his three battles with the elements and special effects in 38/39, "The Rains Came" (1939, director Clarence Brown), with Power, George Brent and Myrna Loy menaced by earthquake, flood (and later, beyond these few excerpts, typhoid) and finally "In Old Chicago" (1938, director Henry King) with Tyrone Power battling the fire and crooked politicians at one and the same time, to deservedly win a happy ending with Ida Faye. --- William K. Everson ---