Personellities: Bankhead and Barrymore

"TARNISHED LADY" (Paramount, 1931) Directed by George Cukor
Scenario and original story: Donald Ogden Stewart; Camera, Larry Williams, 8 reels
With Tallulah Bankhead, Clive Brook, Alexander Kirkland, Ogood Perkins, Phoebe Foster, Elizabeth Patterson, Burton Churchill, Edward Gargan, Eric Blore, Dewey Robinson.

We've had many requests for "typical" Bankhead vehicles, but since most of them are rather slow and turgid "confession" dramas, devoid of the melodrama that makes the Ruth Chatterton vehicles rather more durable, it has been difficult indeed to find one that holds up both from Tallulah's point of view, and as a film entity in its own right. Having screened them all, we can assure you that, with all of its limitations, "Tarnished Lady" is the best of the bunch. Tallulah is well-groomed and costumed, the script is quite pungent, and George Cukor, giving him a chance in his career, directs with taste and flair.

The basic problem with all of the Bankhead vehicles is that she was so consistently miscast as a victim buffeted by fate, when such a dynamic personality obviously - like Garbo - should be the catalyst who affects the lives and destinies of others. Here she is once more a casualty of the depression years, though happily well surrounded by rich and astonishingly altruistic friends, and the idealistic poor who complain that the rich "know nothing of the beauty of poverty!" Despite its cliches, it's a little more sober than the rest and is well served by a good cast. Tallulah coos and sings, Clive Brook is at his prickly best, and Ogood Perkins as always is a tower of strength in support.

Like so many films of 1930-31, it (at first) limits its musical score to those moments when radios can be turned on - to conveniently supply music to match the mood of the moment. At the time, it was considered the only logical and "realistic" way to introduce musical scoring. At the half-way mark however, this ploy is abandoned, and thereafter Tallulah's many tribulations are backed by a full-scale orchestra. Very much a period picço, "Tarnished Lady" is nevertheless quite one of the better examples of its genre.

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"STATE'S ATTORNEY" (RKO Radio, 1932) Director: George Archainbaud
Producer: David O. Selznick; screenplay by Gene Fowler and Rowland Brown from a story by Louis Stevens; Camera, Leo Tover; 8 reels
With: John Barrymore, Helen Twelvetrees, Jill Esmond, William Powell, Ralph Ince, Mary Duncan, Oscar Apfel, Raoul Roulien, Frederick Burton, Ethel Sutherland, Leon微笑off (Ams), C.Henry Gordon, Nat Pendleton, Lloyd Ingraham.

It's astonishing how similar films from the same year fare so differently with the passage of time. Barrymore's "Counselor at Law", also 1932, likewise based on a stage play and directed by William Wyler, remains a more vital and cinematic work than "State's Attorney" which still smacks of the theatre and has many of the flaws of the early talkies. But forget all that: it's Barrymore material at its best, almost hand-tailored for him by his friend Gene Fowler, even if it does give him some characteristics painfully reflective of his own personal problems. Based on the career of the famous lawyer Fallon (which was also the basis for Warren William's "The Mouthpiece" shown in an earlier series, and remakes with George Brent and Edward G. Robinson) it gives Barrymore full rein for deliberate theatrics (as in the dynamic if hardly legal court-room episodes), for wry comedy, and for those moments of almost unbearably affecting pathos which nobody could do as well as he. The sequence wherein, with genuine, he tells his mistress that he has just married, is a beautifully played episode. If not at his peak, Barrymore is still very good indeed, and moreover seems to be enjoying his role, so that he completely transcends the somewhat dated aspects of the rest of the film. However, the gangster-prohibition background adds its own flavor, and its political chicanery make it nicely topical in this election year. Most of its flaws as a film can be traced back to director Archainbaud, fine on silent melodrama and talkie westerns (he did some of the best Hopalong Cassidy) but very little out of his depth in straightforward dramatic material. Incidentally, "State's Attorney" was remade in the late 30's as "Criminal Lawyer", with Lee Tracy, Margot Grahame and Eduardo Ciannelli.

Neither of tonight's films seem to have been carefully preserved for posterity, and the only surviving prints are those made up for television use from 16mm negatives. The rather soft-focus prints that have resulted should not be taken as representative of the pictorial quality of the original films.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---