
"The Last Flight" is a curious little minor classic that, a one-day showing at the New Yorker ten years ago, has never been revived and has nowhere near the reputation it deserves. It is a daring picture, and especially if one knows nothing about the film, it has a stunning impact. It certainly translates into filmic terms the Fitzgerald-Hemingway fever and tragedy of the "lost generation" far more poignantly and convincingly than any other movie I can recall, and it is certainly superior in every way to the much later adaptation of Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" to which it has some striking parallels. Possibly it is not enhanced by repeated viewings; the brittle stage dialogue and the authentic flippancies of the 20's tend to pall, while the deliberately forced gaiety comes to seem doubly forced. But this is hardly a criticism of the film; many movies gain immensurably from repeated viewings, while others, like "The Last Flight" make their greatest impact on the basis of first impressions. Considering that it starts out with so much spectacular war footage (culled from "The Dawn Patrol", "The Patent Leather Kid", "Lilac Time" and "Chances"), the film maintains a surprisingly dynamic pace even when telling most of its story via dialogue. Barthelmess' quiet sincerity makes him an ideal hero, and Helen Chandler does a fine job of the rather weird heroine, but the biggest surprise of all is David Manners, usually just affable and somewhat ineffectual as the stock lead in horror films, who brings real depth and poignancy to his role here, and particularly to his beautifully played death scene. "The Last Flight" also represents the directorial debut on an English-language film of William Dieterle, former actor in German silent, and brought over here to star in and sometimes direct those hybrid foreign versions of early talkies. Apart from being an extremely well directed film, "The Last Flight" also suggests that Dieterle had very quickly acquired a full understanding of American mores of the 20's; far more certainly than Lazlo Benedek displayed about America in the 50's when he made "The Wild One".

--- intermission ---

"PICTURE SNATCHER" (Warner Brothers, 1933) Director: Lloyd Bacon Scenario by Allen Rivkin and P.J. Wolfson from a story by Danny Abeles; Camera: Sol Polito; 7 reels With James Cagney, Ralph Bellamy, Alice White, Patricia Ellis, Hal Harode, Robert Emmett O'Connor, Robert Barrat, Pat Collins, Tom Wilson, Barbara Rogers, Rene Whitney, Alice Jana, Jill Dennett, George Chandler, Stanley Blystone, Tom Tully, Arthur Housman, Sterling Holloway, Joan Barclay, Donald Kerr, Selmer Jackson, Robert Cavanagh, Charles King, Milt Kibbee, Mike Donlin, Gino Corrado, Maurice Black.

Notes on films like "Picture Snatcher" seem almost superfluous; these Warner action-comedy-melodramas were devised as solidly commercial films of no major importance; and by virtue of their race, their snappy dialogue, their casts and their casual determination to be entertaining - in one way or another - throughout all of their brief running-time, they are sure-fire audience pleasers today. Even the weaker ones provoke enthusiastic response, and "Picture Snatcher", a callous, actionful, racy "black" comedy-melodrama about yellow journalism, is one of the best. Warners always had a morbid obsession with death-house themes and sequences (always electrocution for some reason!) and used the motif for comedy in "Blessed Event", "Front Page Woman" and others, and for raw melodrama in "Two Seconds", "The Mouthpiece", "Angels With Dirty Faces" and countless others. Here, the notorious photograph of Ruth Snyder in the electric chair is used as the basis for a fictional romp which is full of genial depravity and corruption, machine-gun-happy cops and energetic young nymphomaniacs. Even in the climactic gun battle, the cornered killer takes time out for a few sick quips about his wife, children and an ill-used mistress! The frenetic pace of the最初 four 1933 films included the equally dynamic "Footlight Parade" and "42nd Street") initially seems a little wasted on fairly trivial subject matter - but once we get into that jolly death house sequence we're away with a vengeance, and the action, chaos, snappy dialogue, man-handlings and garter snappings never let up. -- W.K.Feerson