Two Stylists: John Ford and James Whale

"THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS" (Rko Radio, 1936) Directed by JOHN FORD
Associate Producers, Cliff Reid, Robert Sisk; Screenplay by
Dudley Nichols from the play by Sean O'Casey; Camera, Joseph
August; music by Nathaniel Shilkret and Roy Webb; Art Director,
Van Nest Polglase; editor, George Hively; 7 reels
With Barbara Stanwyck, Preston Foster, Barry Fitzgerald, Dennis O'Kea,
Eileen Crowe, Arthur Shields, P.J. McCormick, Una O'Connor, Bonita
Greenville, Alan Hale, Charles McComas, Kathleen Lockhart, Iona Morris,
Dorothy Neal, Neil Fitzgerald, Robert Homans, Cyril McLogan, James Cagney,
Dorothy Corrigan, Mary Gordon, Doris Lloyd, Mary Quinn, Lionel Pape,
Michael Fitzmaurice, Gaylord Pendleton, Frank Agey, Jack Pinnick.

Ford's last short, programmer-length film has been missing for years,
never reissued nor televised, its ownership having passed into hands
other than Rko Radio who produced it. It was never considered a major
Ford, and in 1936 it was still under the shadow of its predecessor,
the much over-rated "The Informer". Furthermore, between the two
"Irish" films Ford had turned out three quite exceptional pictures:
"The Prisoner of Shark Island", "Steamboat Round the Bend" and "Mary
of Scotland", so its cool reception then can be understood. The
succeeding three decades haven't made it a better picture - or a
worse one - but they've somehow changed it quite a bit. The film's
saving graces today are its robust action and a lack of pretension in
Ford's direction, the very qualities that in 1936 probably prevented
it from being taken too seriously. On the other hand, O'Casey's
dialogue and characters date incredibly; the shawl-clad women, the
street singer, the lines of wild poetry, all combine to push it
dangerously close to parody at times. Admittedly, this kind of writing
has been peroded a great deal since, so the fault isn't altogether
with O'Casey or with Nichols' toned-down adaptation with its moderately
happy ending.

But regardless of this dated literary quality, it's
difficult to take the film seriously - at least on an emotional
and dramatic level - because Ford himself, professional Irishman that
he is, also seems unwilling to commit himself to a serious level. His
and Nichols' approach seems to be that everybody must know all the
ramifications of the Irish "troubles" (few do, and even fewer seem to
care) and that therefore they can be treated, like the Russian
Revolution or the American Civil War, as a convenient backdrop for
romantic tribulations and rugged action. "The Plough and the Stars"
uses Ireland's problems the way "Barbara Frietchie" used the Civil
War, or "Tempest" the Russian Revolution; indeed, many of the facets
and types seem literalized in Ford's approach. Tricky, but even dull though it
was, "The Informer" was at least convincing; with far more elaborate
sets and bigger production values, "The Plough and the Stars" is
always theatrical (in a movie sense, not in the original O'Casey sense)
and rarely convincing. Stanwyck has her big hysterical scene - as
obligatory for her as for Jean Gabin - early in the proceedings, and
as soon as she had calmed down, there are others ready to take over.
Despite the utilization of the (often unintelligible) Abbey Players
and the assistant director credit to Arthur Shields, Ford seems to
have had pretty much his own way the whole time, the sole exception
being the preferred treatment he was forced to extend to Rko's big
star, Barbara Stanwyck, who gets for longer scenes and bigger closeups
than was usually the lot of a Ford leading-lady. But the Ford
images are always there to crowd out the mere humans; one is far more
likely to remember that superb shot of the flag fluttering down
against the darkening skies than any of the scenes or speeches more
directly related to the story. All in all, the result is a film
suspiciously akin to the spirit of "Fort Apache", with the splendidly
staged action sequences dominating, and the British substituting for
the Apaches.

That it is an enjoyable and a typical Ford rather than a major one
should be no cause for misgivings. It's a handsome and exciting film
to watch, even though it goes nowhere; but then it would be very
difficult for any film about Irish rebels to really go anywhere, or
for audiences to work up much sympathy for their mischief-making.

--- ten minute intermission ---
"REMEMBER LAST NIGHT?" (Universal, 1935) Directed by James Whale
Screenplay by Doris Kellogg, Dan Tetheroh and Harry Clark from
"The Hangover Murders" by Adam Hobhouse; Camera, Joseph Valentine
Produced by Carl Laemmle Jr., edited by Ted Kent; 9 reels
With Edward Arnold, Constance Cummings, Robert Young, Sally Eilers,
Reginald Denny, Robert Armstrong, Monroe Owen, George Meeker, Jack
LaBue, Ed Brophy, Louise Henry, Gustav von Seyffertitz, Gregory
Retoff, Raffaele Ottiano, E.E. Clive, Arthur Treacher, Frank Reich, Alice
Laddell, Dewey Robinson, Harry Woods, Ed Gergan, Kate Price,
Warner Richmond, Wade Boteler.

In "Remember Last Night?" James Whale sets out both to spoof the
popular genre of civilized, all-in-the-family mysteries exemplified
by "The Thin Man", and to make a solidly enjoyable film in that
genre. Perhaps no film that wants to be accepted on two such
divergent levels can be wholly successful on either, but the
elaborately-produced "Remember Last Night?" is such an exhilarating,
fast paced and stylish frolic that one never seems to care whether
it "succeeds" or not. As deliberately incoherent and complicated as
"The Big Sleep", it goes like an express train in all directions
but remains a well-disciplined film regardless. There's an unusually
wild party for a film from the normally sedate mid-30's; a weirdly-
lit hypnosis sequence in a thunderstorm (with Gustav von Seyffertitz
of course) in which Whale kids his own stock-in-trade of Gothic
terror; and there are sequences of suspense in which the veneer of
fun is abandoned too quickly for comfort. There are suspects, clues
and red-herrings galore, and if the identity of the "hidden" killer
is easily guessable from the very beginning, it matters not one whit
because we still don't know why or how. The dialogue is bright and
breezy, and Whale's inevitable mordant humor is well in evidence in
the person of E.E. Clive - his burgomester in "The Bride of
Frankenstein".

All in all, "Remember Last Night?" is a wonderful example of what
skilled playing and directorial style can do for basically ordinary
material. Richard Thorpe, Paul Sloane or John Farrow could have
taken this script, and it probably wouldn't be worth 65 minutes of
our time today; W.S. Van Dyke, William A. Howard or Whale could have
turned it into an object lesson in how cinematics and personal style
can really bring a film to life. And of course, Whale has done just
that. Striking clocks never seem to be imbued with as much life of
their own as in a Whale film - as witness an example here - and when
his gliding camera moves, it does so with a vengeance - through
hallways, across rooms, upstairs, all in single sweeping shots. But
they know when to stop too. There's a lot of elegance for its own
sake, sets and lighting that are perhaps too stunning in realism
and logic were to be the keynote, but in a piece of froth like this,
visual elegance is quite legitimate, and Whale knows just how to
apply it. He also can't resist making occasional gag references to
"Frankenstein" and "Dracula".

Compared with "The Bride of Frankenstein", "The Old Dark House",
"One More River" and especially "The Kiss Before the Mirror",
"Remember Last Night?" is admittedly lesser James Whale - in the
sense that "The Love Flower" is "lesser" Griffith, or "The Lost
Petrol" "lesser" Ford. What a pity that more of today's directors
don't occasionally take time out to make such "lesser" pictures too.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---