"THE GREAT BARRIER" (Gaumont-British, 1936) Directed: Milton Rosner
Screenplay by Michael Barringer and Milton Rosner from an original
story by Alan Sullivan; Camera, Glen MacWilliams, Sepp Algeir, Bob
Martin; editors, Charles Fried and B.H. Hipkins; 8 reels
With: Richard Arlen, Antoinette Cellier, Lilli Palmer, Barry Mackay,
J. Farrell MacDonald, Roy Emerton, Ben Weldon, Jock Mackay, Frank
McClynn sr., Henry Victor, Ernest Sefton, Arthur Loft, Gilbert Emery,
Tom London, Jack Bockwell, Slim Whittaker.

Released in the U.S. as "Silent Barriers", and later reissued as "Hell's
Gateway", "The Great Barrier" was one of the most successful of
Gaumont's Hollywood-oriented films of the 30's. Several British films
had tried to adapt local and colonial history to a Western format
("Lorna Doone", "Rhodes of Africa") hoping to tap the American
action market, and "The Great Barrier" came off both rich and thin. Of
course it was largely shot in Canada (the intercutting with obvious studio sets back
in England is a bit jarring), had a typical western pioneering story,
and several American players - including familiar "bit" faces - so it
is not surprising that it worked so well. Presumably there was also an
experienced though uncredited second unit director working on the film
too, since the action sequences have a real Hollywood zip - most
especially the excellently staged chase after the train, and it's
hard to believe that Milton Rosner, a character actor-writer-director
of the George Arliss and Katheson Lang school, would suddenly have
turned himself into a sex symbol! The dialogue is crisp, and the story
at least serviceable, although the triangle situation seems overly
trite today. For the record though, some Canadian governmental
officials with whom I once saw the film told me that its historical
inaccuracies were blatant enough to warrant the severing of diplomatic
relations! If it's two-thirds Western, it's also one third German
mountain epic too - and Lilli Palmer, agitating in the climactic mob
scenes, reminds one more than a little of Brigitte Helm as the robot
Maria in Lang's "Metropolis". Surely photographed and well-paced,
"The Great Barrier" has its share of cliches - but in 1936, it could
look back on only John Ford's silent "The Iron Horse" and the Russian
"Turksib"; DeMille's "Union Pacific" and all the increasingly more
standardised railroad-building epics ("Santa Fe", "Kansas Pacific") lay
well ahead. I must admit being baffled by the engineering feasibility
of the all-important mountain pass in the last reel - since it seems to
be surrounded by quagmires, rapids and more mountains - but perhaps I
am being too picayune.

"S.O.S. ICEBERG" (Universal, 1933) Directed by Tay Garnett and Dr.
Arnold Fanck; Adaptation and dialogue by Tom Reed and Edwin Knopf
from an original story by Arnold Fanck; Camera, Hans Schneeberger
and Richard Angst; editor, Andrew Karton; 8 reels
With Rod La Rocque, Leni Riefenstahl, Sepp Rist, Gibson Gowland, Dr.
Max Holzboer, Walter Rimi, Major Ernst Udet.

An offshoot of both the German mountain films of the late 20's (then
enjoying a temporary rebirth through a series of co-productions with
Universal in Hollywood) and the exploratory-adventure film cycle that
followed in the wake of the Lindbergh flight and the Byrd expedition,
"S.O.S. Iceberg" is a unique and quite fantastic production. Its
lengthy and impressive credits (only partially listed above) testify
to the complexity of co-production in those days, and also to the
authenticity of much of the expedition-shot footage. But it is
essentially a "stunt" film more concerned with showmanship than
anything else. After a rather exposatory scene, we are right into the
meat of the picture - which is literally all climax, though building
constanttly to one of the most exciting last-minute rescues ever
devised. In a way, it's a pity that so much hardship and technical
skill was squandered on so empty a film. It has the breathless and
shock-episodic quality of the serial, given added stature by the
quasi-documentary aspect of 90% of the footage. There are special
effects, one or two miniatures, thrills achieved only through a
combination of actual footage and re-staged studio inserts, but
these one needn't quibble about in the least. It looks real, and one
soon forgets that the scientific aims of the expedition are never
clearly stated, and that non-stop sensation is substituted for the
hardship and drudgery that is the normal lot of the explorer.
Stumingly photographed, sparse on dialogue and motivation (the villain
becomes an "instant" villain merely to add to the melodrama), it is
long on action and natural sensation - and incidentally provided
Universal with invaluable long stretches of action material to beef up
later "B" pictures and serials.

-----William K. Everson------