
"Union Depot", which came out in January of 1932, is clearly an attempt to jump the gun on "Grand Hotel" which had been in production earlier and which, due to the less hurried manner in which the wheels went around at MGM, would not be released until April. It has the same basic idea, of course, as a permanent trademark to some other and more current all-star films as "The V.I.P.'s". But while those two MGM films were careful to keep to a high-level social strata, this Warner film replaces ballerinas and barons with floozies, con-men and a particularly vicious sex degenerate! It has a little something for everyone, from race gage to romance, but with the overall stress on melodrama. The climax reaches a real pitch of excitement with an extremely good chase and stunt fight through the railyards and atop a locomotive. And considering the audience-pleasing ingredients throughout, the climax is a surprisingly honest and off-beat one - without being so off-beat as to send the customers running. "Union Depot" is an unimportant film, but it's also a tight, fast-paced and thoroughly enjoyable programmer. Not the least of its delights is its huge roster of familiar character players, with Alan Hale especially effective in the equivalent of Wallace Beery's "Grand Hotel" role. And there's a chilling performance as the sex degenerate from that curious individual George Rosemer -- a playwright, scenarist, director, actor, and former circus, vaudeville and medicine show performer.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

MR. SKITCH (Fox, 1932) Directed by James Cruze; scenario by Ralph Spence and Sonya Levien from a story by Anne Cameron; camera, John Seitz; 7 rls. With Will Rogers, Zasu Pitts, Rochelle Hudson, Charles Starrett, Florence Desmond, Harry Green, Eugene Pallette, Charles Middleton.

Although Will Rogers was famous (or notorious) for being director-proof and for using his scripts only as a rough guide, translating dialogue and comedy business into his own particular idiom, he still needed good directors and solid scripts even if their presence was often hidden. It's no coincidence that his best films were the three he made with John Ford -- or that his worst were four of the five that he made in the last year of his life (1935) when the formula was wearing thin, and when Fox were content to hand him routine scripts and average directors on the theory that he'd pull off a salvage operation and come up with an acceptable and pro-marketed commodity. In 1935 he did improve. Obviously Mr. Skitch, or rather "In Old Kentucky", "The County Chairman", "Doubting Thomas" and "Life Begins at 40" and was helped tremendously by Ford's "Steamboat Round the Bend", one of his -- and Ford's -- best pictures. But the magic was evaporating; his tragic death renders futile any conjecture about what his career might have become, although a co-starring vehicle with Shirley Temple would seem to have been a certainty. In 1933 at any rate, he was still riding high, his pictures offering both variety and quality. "Mr. Skitch", directed by all-but-veteran James Cruze ("The Covered Wagon"), who also directed another well-liked Rogers talkie, "David Harum", is amiably uneventful but often charming and very funny, due no little to the better-than-average comedy material given to Zasu Pitts and the balancing comedy of Florence Desmond, the brilliant British comedienne whose limitations of well-known personalities (including Zasu Pitts) are strikingly accurate yet free of malice. If there is a complaint we can level against the film today it is the annoying use of back-projection and studio-work for a story dealing with a cross-country automobile trip. But bear in mind that the NY-California auto vacation had been a growing fad ever since the mass production of the auto and the improvement of roads. Silent films had been full of such jaunts as a basic plot-line, from 2-reel Sennett comedies like "Hoboken to Hollywood" to regular features like "Rubber Tires". By the early 30's, even though the depression had added dramatic values to the purely comic ones, the plot was basically useful only as background motivation for Rogers, as here, or for W.C. Fields in "It's A Gift". There was no novelty value in location shooting, so for economical reasons it was kept to a workable minimum. If not absolutely top Rogers, "Mr. Skitch" is well up in the second echelon, and a good example of Rogers' skill in making accurate comments on the current social climate in any way long-sight and the fact that he was an entertainer. "Mr. Skitch" is valuable both as a film holding up a mirror to a social problem (some seven years ahead of "The Grapes of Wrath") and as a thoroughly representative Rogers vehicle.

-- Wm.K.Everson --