Two "Lost" Romances Re-discovered

"THE BIRD OF PARADISE" (RKO Radio, 1932) Directed by King Vidor
Executive Producer, David O. Selznick; adapted by Wells Root, Wanda
Tuchock and Frances Goodrich from the play by Richard Walton Tully;
Musical Director: Max Steiner; Camera, Clyde de Vinna; Edward Cronjager and
Lucien Andriot; 8 reels
With Dolores Del Rio, Joel McCrea, John Halliday, Lon Chaney Jr., Skeets
Gallagher, Bert Roach, Sophie Ortega, Wade Boteler, Arnold Gray, Reginald
Simpson, Napoleon Pukus.

Coming right after King Vidor's "Street Scene" and "The Champ", "The Bird
of Paradise" must have seemed like a wonderful opportunity to get back to
the pictorial lyricism of some of his silents. And in that sense, it almost
succeeds, helped no little by the combined talents of three superb camera-
men, one of whom, Clyde de Vinna, had also photographed "White Shadows in
the South Seas". By any standards, this "Bird of Paradise" is a vast
improvement on the entertaining but garish and monumentally miscast color
version of the 50's. However, it is still a tale that properly belongs to
the silent era, where lyricism and larger-than-life emotions can dominate,
and where the dated dialogue of this version would not intrude. Don't
expect to be murdered by the film - but as a piece of handsome schmaltz it
certainly has its moments, and surprisingly some good melodramatic thrills
too, especially a rather unlikely escape from a well designed whirlpool.
Too, Miss Del Rio's beauty is still quite breath-taking, and one gets some
extremely generous displays of it - although the usual garland of flowers
that adorns her upper torso represents an engineering feat rivalling the
pyramids, since it never once loses decorum and remains steadfastly in
place at all times!
Quite incidentally, in a recent interview Buster Crabbe referred to having double for Joel McCrea for swimming scenes in a
1932 film that, though un-named, was clearly (from his description) "The
Most Dangerous Game". One wonders whether he didn't double for McCrea in
this film too, since it was made at practically the same time, and offers
far more need for athletic doubling in swimming and other action scenes
than "The Most Dangerous Game".

--------- 10 Minute Intermission  ---------

"STREET ANGEL" (Fox, 1928) Directed by Frank Borzage
Adaptation by Philip Klein and Henry Roberts Symonds, and continuity by
Marjory Orth, from the play "Lady Cristalinda" by Honkton Hoffe, later
issued in novel form as "Street Angel"; Camera, Ernest Palmer and Paul
Ivano; Sets, Harry Oliver; Special Effects, Alfredo Sabato; 10 reels
With Janet Gaynor, Charles Farrell, Natalie Kingston, Henry Armetta, Guido
Trento, Alberto Ragabiliati, Frank Reicher.

A tremendous artistic and commercial success, "Street Angel" was cited by
the NY Times for its "new peak of perfection in photography" - probably a
simplified way of saying production design, for one cannot really separate
sets and lighting from camerawork. The praise is understandable, for in a
good original 35mm print, the film is pictorially breath-taking; even in
this first-generation dupe (which should be a good deal better than it is,
thanks to the shoddy standards accepted by Hollywood labs today) it is
still quite stunning. But in other ways, the film is too heavy and too
calculated an attempt to fuse the artistic and commercial elements of both
"Sunrise" and "Seventh Heaven" (two Fox films of 1927) into one "sure-fire"
blockbuster. Both of those films had had majestically simple stories, but
here the plot is just too fragile and even silly to hold up under 10 reels of
"prestige" treatment. Borzage, a sensitive director, was able to work
his magic best on the films about the "little" slices of life, where he
was able to add and build with that indefinable quality of rich emotionalism
that was so uniquely his. He was less successful on the "big" scenes - "the
Green Light", "Little Man What Now?" - where he had no chance to be better
than his scripts. "Street Angel" is too overwhelmed from the beginning to
milk truer and is far too "byg," a production for moments of honesty and
uncalculated sentiment to slip in unawares. But fortunately its visual
aspect is so stylized as to be sufficient in itself: the astonishing mobility
of the camera roaming around a huge set, the harsh, Germanic, geometric
compositions, the ever-present mist, all of these confirm the suggestions
of other recently rediscovered Fox films of 1927-34 that F.W. Hurm's influence on the directors, cameramen and designers working for Fox at that
time was immeasurable. So enjoy Janet Gaynor's charm, enjoy the visuals,
forget the story with its vague relationships and melodramatic excesses,
and overlook (if you can) the too-heavy original musical score which finds
its themes song "Angela Mia" into one's brain incessantly via the score,
vocals, and even by whistling. Incidentally, take note of the particularly
neat piece of visual trickery which transforms Catalina Bay into Naples,
simply by careful placement of the camera and a partial glass-shot.

--- W.K.Everson ---