
Never reissued, nor sold to television, "The Road Back" is one of the more ambitious of Hollywood's rather half-hearted attacks on German militarism in the 30's. Even allowing for the fact that last-minute cuts made to satisfy the government weakened the climax, it is not as good a film as one would like it to be. It was both an artistic and boxoffice disappointment in 1937 and the years haven't changed that, although our now much greater appreciation of Whale's career makes it, in perspective, a much more interesting film. Whale obviously always cared more about making films of great theatrical and visual style than in making films of social comment. Here he brings the old "Broadway" crane-camera into play for some exciting overhead movement shots; he copies Lewis Milestone's lateral tracking, and his battlefield scenes have a typical Whale/Gothic look. His old "regulars" - Frye, Atwill, Van Sloan - are handled better than the leads, particularly the out-of-his-depth John King, who is responsible for most of the film's weaknesses. As a sequel to "All Quiet on the Western Front" it is structurally well done, although most of the principals died in the original and have to be merely referred to here, but as a film it can hardly compare with it. It's handsomely made with extremely expensive production values and care over details, but it fails (and compare it with Renoir's "La Grande Illusion" of the same year) it lacks the passion that would show that Whale and Universal really believed in it as an important social comment rather than as a potential boxoffice success.

Ten Minute Intermission


To many, James Whale is merely the director who made four of the best horror films of the 30's - yet the overall taste of these films ("Frankenstein", "The Bride of Frankenstein", "The Old Dark House", "The Invisible Man") and of such totally different films as "Show Boat" made it apparent that his ability as a film-maker must far transcend the horror category. The comparatively recent re-discovery of one of his best American films, "The Kiss Before The Mirror", confirms that as a stylist and filmic sophisticate, he was quite the peer of Lubitsch.

"One More River" was Galsworthy's last novel, and also the last in his famous "Poratye Saga". It was a kind of story especially prevalent on the screen in the thirties, a natural for the afternoon trade and for housewives to see together after a shopping outing. They'd all avidly consume the book, argue over casting choices, see the film, and discuss it some more. By this I don't mean to condemn "One More River" to such a rigid and unimportant little niche. Its type was familiar, but films of that type were rare up to the standards of "One More River".

Perhaps as an Englishmen I am nostalgically enthusiastic because I have never seen such a convincing and "right" Hollywood film set in England -- not even Frank Lloyd's "Cavalcade". Of course, director, scenarist and 99% of the cast were fully paid-up members of the Empire, obviously working with material that had their sympathy and understanding. The small details that are wrong (Great Western Railroad trains inexplicably running on Southern Railroad tracks) stand out only because everything else, and the totaly of the milieu, is so right. It is a pleasing, gentle, civilised reflection of England in a period of social change: probably it is realistic romanticised a portrait as was "Gone With the Wind" of a changing South, but its emotional appeal isn't lessened because of that. Whale seems to have a particular fondness (shown in "The Old Dark House" too) for outmoded
relics of the Victorian age, a type very prevalent in Britain of the early 30's. Quite apart from the sheer delight of seeing some dear old codger like Henry Stephenson amble in every time a door opens, or enjoying Mrs. Patrick Campbell in the biggest of her mere handful of screen roles, or watching the superb anlomb of Diana Wynyard as she downplays an (off-screen) rape by fortifying herself with a cup of tea, it is all so tasteful, well-written, beautifully acted (and spoken) that one deplores all the more the ugliness of so many contemporary movies. "One More River" is sophisticated, witty and "adult" in the truest sense of that word, yet it never offends or finds it necessary to resort to embarrassing shock-tactics.

Most of the virtues we have stressed thus far have been those of writing and acting. But Whale's contribution as director is one of the most telling of all. A former actor and stage director, he knows the value of the bravura entrance or exit and makes the most of them without letting the film itself become mere theatre. A basically dialogue-developed story is kept superbly on the move (far more so than in the not-dissimilar "The Winslow Boy") and the unobtrusive mobility of the camera in the courtroom sequence makes it one of the finest and most dramatic trial scenes ever filmed. (How nice too to see a trial in which people actually testify and listen to what is said, instead of ranting and raving off witticisms, which is the normal modus operandi for the Hollywood-style trial). Grace is the keynote of this film -- from the cool beauty of Diana Wynyard on through the elegant sets and camerawork and smooth editing. How beautifully cut, for example, is the simple scene of the train's arrival at the country station.

"One More River" perhaps derives too much from the arts of literature and the stage to be a major movie classic. But it is a fine film that deserves to be far better known that it is. Moreover, purely as an entertainment, it is a thoroughly satisfying work -- a mild form of what praise perhaps, yet how many films do really satisfy?

Due to the length of tonight's program, there will be no time for a discussion period. Next week's program will also be on the long side, precluding a post-screening discussion. However, since next week's program is the last in this Summer session, and you may have questions not only about this series but also the upcoming one in the Fall, there will be a short period for questions and answers at 7:30, before the start of the program proper at 7:45.

Mr. K. Everson