Program #6: July 25 1972


Right through the 30's, from the British Studios but more spectacularly from Hollywood, the adventurous cause of British colonialism in India and Africa provided a healthy flow of boxoffice swashbuckling actioners seen mainly through Kiplinesque eyes. Most of these films have remained available through theatrical reissue and television, but "Senders of the River" has virtually disappeared. At one point Robeson's racistic leanings were perhaps more responsible than the film's racial angles for its virtually non-existent showings. Now of course the film's friendly but decidedly condescending attitude towards the African Negro, with its wise-white-father and obedient infant approach, make it - commercially at least - somewhat of a hot potato. Certainly the film could never be remade in such a jingoistic fashion today; in fact a British remake of a few years back - "Coast of Skeletons" with Richard Todd - was so changed as to be unrecognisable.

Like many Korda films of that period, it is expertly made with film production values and excellent photography, much of it by Perine, Coetzau's favorite cameraman. Technically it dates hardly at all, even the averagely used back projection being far more convincing than most such from the 30's. Like so many British films of its type, it never quite makes the most of its action sequences - but it should be remembered that we were less sated by thrill and shock in the first half of the thirties, and demanded less from our movies. Even "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" is decidedly tame in the action department, the big climactic charge being handled in a single shot without the excitement-building use of inserted close shots or stunt horse falls. The big thrill in action spectacles came later in the thirties via "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and "Gunga Din". Still, "Senders of the River" bowls along at a good clip and the characterisations and story hold up well. The location work in Africa is so well blended with footage shot in England that, the studio scenes apart, it is often difficult to tell them apart. It is certainly a superior film to the other big British African adventures of the period ("Rhodes of Africa", "King Solomon's Mines"), and has some of the best documentary footage since "Freder Horn", standouts being the lovely shots of the canoes skimming along the river, and the beautifully photographed sequence of the aerial flight and the various small animal stampedes it causes. (B" pictures later villaged this footage). Leslie Banks is an ideal choice as Senders (what a pity that Jack Hawkins never had a crack at the role in later years) and Robeson is in fine physical and vocal form as Bosambo. U.S. trade reviews back in 1935, liked the film but curiously thought it less commercial than "Emperor Jones", and suggested overcoming this by "plugging Robeson strong, selling the idea that here you have in Mr. Paul Robeson, chief of the jungle in your lobby, with drums, war drums and savage figure". Be assured however that you can safari through our lobby in perfect safety -- at least as far as atmospherics are concerned!

----- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION -----

"THE GREEN PASTURES" (Warner Brothers, 1936) Directed by William Keighley and Jack Connelly; Screenplay, from his own original play, by Jarre Connolly; Camera, Hal Mohr; Special photographic effects, Fred Jackman; 9 reels With Rex Ingram, Oscar Polk, Eddie Anderson, Frank Filer, George Reed, Abraham Gleaves, Myrtle Anderson, Al Stokes, Edna Harris, Ivory Williams, James Fuller, Ernest Whitman, Ray Martin, Clinton Rossmund.

Despite its obvious innate sincerity, "The Green Pastures" - in a racial sense - perhaps dates far more than "Senders of the River". While its intentions were laudable, the end result today is not too far removed from that unfortunate and tasteless "Goin' to Heaven on a Hale" number in Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer". The sequence and this film have a similar visual style, and whatever the motivations, a patronising and decidedly stereotyped pattern emerges. However, it is unfair to look at a film like "The Green Pastures" with the perspective of civil-rights-consciousness of the 70's. In the mid-30's reactions to it were quite different. For one thing, it was the first major all-Black film since "Hallelujah", and in addition was a fantasy at a time in the depression when most movies were firmly rooted in at least superficial reality. So it represented considerable commercial courage to make such a film. Audiences on the whole were tremendously moved by its simplicity of emotion (I remember that I certainly was) and by its overall conception. Religion on the screen
was a touchy business in the 30's. Many countries even banned outright any film in which Christ was depicted in any way excepting symbolical imagery. (DeMille's silent "The King of Kings" was not passed by British censors until the late 1940's!) "The Green Pastures" ran into considerable censorship trouble -- which perhaps gave it the only commercial gimmick that it had! Unwittingly, the film also played into the general attitude of condescension towards the Negro that was widely (if not admittedly) held in the thirties. It permitted audiences to assuage their guilt feelings (if any) in a soap-opera and satirical film devoted to a Negro mythology, but at the same time allowed them to retain their paternalistic superiority. On another tangent, because the film approached religion and the Bible in terms of fantasy and whimsy, it was acceptable (a la with a touch of superiority) to those who found religion (on-screen or off) distasteful. Perhaps today its emotional quality is considerably less, but its academic interest may be somewhat greater: not only as a comment on Hollywood's (and Broadway's) attitude to the Negro as subject matter in the 30's, but also for its quite fascinating visual style. The sets and camerawork are well worthy of study in themselves. Marc Connolly's co-director credit is genuine, but virtually meaningless. He understood nothing of the techniques of film production, and though willing to learn, merely caused delays with his concentration on details that might be important on stage, but which would be lost on screen. Realising this, he gradually withdrew -- affably -- leaving the real guidance of the film in the more expert hands of director Keighley and cameraman Mohr. Not being a Biblical scholar I can make no worthwhile comment on the film's religious viewpoints -- other than to point out that its somewhat critical views of Baxtor, Lionel at odds with Griffith in "Intolerance", and the chances are that Griffith -- as always -- was right. One should also mention the superb performance of Rex Ingram, a fine but too-little-used actor.

FILM SERIES FIFTEEN - FALL '72

Full details of our next season can be found in due time in our Fall Bulletin and fliers, but in the meantime, herewith a very quick breakdown of our films. This time some frankly commercial items have been included - not that makes them any less worthwhile - to offset some rather curious programs of interest primarily to film students and historians.

We're starting on Oct.6th with two films directed by W.S. Van Dyke - his lyrical silent classic WHITE SHADOWS IN THE SOUTH SEAS, with Monte Blue and Raquel Torres, and HAWAIIAN MELODRAMA (1934) with Clark Gable, William Powell, Myrna Loy. Oct 13: THE BISCUIT EATER - the lovely 1939 original, a classic of America, not the current remake; and a complete color print of THE BLUE BIRD (1939) with Shirley Temple, a fantasy that failed to duplicate the commercial success of "The Wizard of Oz" but is in many ways a much better film, Oct 20: NELL Gwynn, the bawdy delightful 1934 British film with Anna Neagle and Sir Cedric Hardwicke; MEN MUST FIGHT (1933), an incredible pictorial vision of a US-Eurasian war in 1940 attended by 1970 anti-war attitudes; a very odd film, the non-philosophic highlights of which include a bombing raid on New York and the destruction of the Empire State Building; Diana Wynyard, Lewis Stone, Robert Young; Oct. 27: TOO HOT TO HANDLE (1938) a marvellously full-blooded and tongue-in-cheek action comedy, with Clark Gable, Myrna Loy, Walter Pidgeon; plus shorts.

Nov 3: The movies and marriage: two silent views: THOMAS KRAAIJ'S BEST CHILD (1917) a remarkably sophisticated pre-Lubitsch marital comedy directed by Mauritz Stiller with Victor Seastrom; and PAZIL (1928), an exotic Arabian romance with Charles Farrell, directed by Howard Hawks, and guaranteed to appeal Women's Lib advocates. November 10: An evening of unspeakable villainy: CRIMES AT THE DARK HOUSE (1940), Tod Slaughter (Britain's Cheney and Kasen of American Psycho fame) in a wild and woolly adaptation of "The Woman in White"; KONGO (1932) A fast and superior remake of the best of Zanzibar; Walter Huston LUCO VELAZ, Conrad Nagel, Virginia Bruce. Nov 17: Two unfamiliar comedies: TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN (1940), one of the best of George Formby's British comedies; DIPLOMANTICOS (1933): one of the best Wheeler & Woolsey comedies, predating the zaniness of the Marx Brothers' similar "Duck Soup". Dec. 1: Two films about actors: RETURN TO YESTERDAY (1939) a charming, poignant film about a Robert Morley play with Clive Brook and Anna Lee; THE GREAT PROFILE (1940) with John Barrymore, Anne Baxter, Lionel Atwill. Dec. 8: THE HICHEANCES OF THE WOLVES (1933), one of the most gigantic of all movie spectacles, a French classic unseen here since its original release. Dec. 15: Man vs the outdoors: CONGORILLA (1932) Best of the Martin-Johnson documentaries; ESQUILO (1933) Coming full circle. we complete the series by returning to W.S. Van Dyke and an adaptation of the book of Peter Freuchen.

Much fuller details on all of these films will be found in the forthcoming Bulletins and fliers.

Wm. K. Eddison