Two Successors to Mary Pickford in an evening of charm and whimsy

DADDY LONG LEGS (Fox, 1931) Directed by Alfred Santell; scenario by Sonya Levien and S.N. Behrman from the novel by Jean Webster; Camera, Lucien Andriot; 73 minutes.


"Daddy Long Legs" was filmed earlier (1919) as a Mary Pickford silent, and would be done again in 1955 as a glossy Technicolor vehicle for Fred Astaire and Leslie Caron. From 1927 through the early thirties, Janet Gaynor had unofficially assumed Mary Pickford's America's Sweetheart throne, and tonight's film is one of the most enjoyable and typical (if least elaborate and pretentious) from that brief but profitable reign. It's based of course on one of the most popular of the simple yet enjoyable books of Jean Webster. Unlike the books of Lloyd Douglas (an author who enjoys particular acclaim, popularity and movie attention in the thirties) the books of Jean Webster (and for that matter, the similar Gene Stratton Porter) do not date. They are as enjoyable as they ever were. Unfortunately, there is just no longer any mass market for their kind of sentiment and Americana, just as there is no longer any market for films like "Daddy Long Legs". Nothing really happens in it, and judged by the content of today's movies, ... it is literally something from an alien and far more innocent world, which is perhaps one of the reasons why we find it so charming. Stories like this need anymore else genuine honesty in their sentiment (enough discipline not to exploit and vulgarize the sentiment and yet at the same time not to be ashamed of its own sentiment) and brevity in the telling, so that the basically uneventful story-line never drags, and there is no time for cliches to occur or to be predicted. "Daddy Long Legs" fills these easier-said-than-done strictures rather nicely, and is certainly helped along by the charm and grace of Janet Gaynor. At the time the mildly "jazzy-up" 30's background might have seemed an undue deviation from Webster's original, but today the 30's seem almost as unsophisticated as the pre-20's -- even to the casual racial slurs in the opening scenes, which might raise a few hackles today but hardly raised an eyebrow then. Tonight's print is a reversal print (e.g., made from an existing print, not from a negative) made from the sole surviving and fast-decaying 35mm print. The occasional signs of decomposition and surface noise on the sound track were inherited from that original, which hopefully will be copied officially before too long or tonight's 16mm print will be the only relic of this really charming little trifle.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

FETER PAN (Paramount, 1924) Directed by Herbert Brenon; camera, James Wong Howe; screenplay by Willis Goldbeck from the play by Sir James Barrie; Special effects by Roy Pomeroy. 100 minutes.

With Betty Bronson (Peter Pan), Ernest Torrence (Captain Hook), Mary Brian (Wendy) Esther Balston (Mrs Darling), Cyril Chadwick (Mr. Darling), Anna May Wong (Tiger Lily); George Arliss (Nana) Virginia Brown Fair (Tinker Bell); Phillie de Lacy (Michael) Jack Murphy (John).

Piano Score arranged and played by Stuart Oderman.

Space precludes the detailed appraisal that this enchanting film deserves, but perhaps it is as well to say little and let the charm of the film make itself manifest. The subject, with its delicate mixture of comedy, pathos and magic, has always been a difficult one. In animated form, it totally defeated Disney, as a stage and tv musical it was usually strident and lacking in grace, and the many respectful stage versions (especially in London) have unavoidably lacked the production expertise that film could provide. So shot of the gloom at the store, the magic of the room, the iron of the stage would have dared to emulate Barrie entirely by taking the story through to his almost unbearably poignant and tragic final chapter. Rather surprisingly, this film (the "definitive" movie "Peter Pan", though admittedly also the only one thus far, Disney excepted, despite many announced remakes for Audrey Hepburn, Mia Farrow and others) doesn't really exploit the magical possibilities of film either: apart from the use of a real galleon, some excellent but sparse special effects involving Tinkerbell, and an overwhelmingly lovely shot of the galleon taking off and flying through the clouds, nothing really takes place in the film. So shot of the galleon also did no harm, (Brenon's taste and reverence for the original was doubtless responsible. He should not be held responsible for the studio turning the children into Americans and inserting patriotic titles, though these are few and far between. "Photoplay" was rightly incensed at this, and likened it to the British filming "Tom Sawyer" and transferring it all to the Thames!). However, the occasional filmic shortcomings do not interfere with the work as a whole, although Brenon must have been aware of them since his follow-up film - another Barrie
adaptation, "A Kiss for Cinderella", also with Betty Bronson - took fullest advantage of the medium and was eminently and creatively cinematic throughout. (It was a better and more sophisticated film than "Peter Pan", but less popular: its failure squashed any further Barrie-Bronson-Bronson collaborations).

Barrie is admittedly not easy to take in this day and age - or any other. As with the Marx Brothers, there are no half-measures - one either accepts him wholeheartedly, or rejects him totally. And, accepting him, it also helps to have a healthy respect for mothers, a belief in fairies, and a willingness to put aside contemporary Women's-Lib attitudes. Given all this, you should find "Peter Pan" literally a jol -- and no little of the film's sense of exhilaration and grace comes from Betty Bronson. She was endorsed by Barrie himself, despite her limited acting experience (two or three minor roles in films of the early 20's), and proved to be an incredibly felicitous choice. Her charm and dancer's grace, her fezile pantomime and expressive face, and her ability to switch effortlessly from mischief and fun to object mithos, won her a tremendous following overnight and for a while it seemed that she might surpass the popularity of Mary Pickford, and indeed did surpass it in her appeal to younger moviegoers. However, Paramount, never very alert to really unique properties or personalities, didn't know how to handle her. Whimsy was not a readily marketable commodity in the 20's, and she was quickly shunted into imitation Clara Bow roles, and her career virtually sabotaged.

The supporting cast is a particularly strong one, with George Ali repeating his literally pantomimic stage role as Nana the dog. But the real hit among the supporting players is Ernest Torrence, a marvellously robust Captain Hook. Nobody ever stood much of a chance against this wily old scene-stealer, and newcomer Bronson was shrewd enough not to compete with him in their scenes together, letting the old scoundrel take over completely with his grimaces, eye-ball rolling, and other attention-getting gestures.

Incidentally, it is quite surprising what real warmth and charm the Barrie dialogue retains even when reduced to title-insert form.

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William K. Everson

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A reminder re Next Week's program

We are sure that everybody is aware of it by now, but in case not: the promised but (as we suspected, dubious) print of "THE LAST WARNING" has not materialised, and we have had to substitute the closest possible equivalent -- "THE MAN WHO LAUGHS", likewise directed by Paul Leni for Universal in the same late silent period. It's a grotesque, bizarre, Chaney-esque adaptation of the Victor Hugo novel - with an equally bizarre musical / sound track. Conrad Veidt, Mary Philbin and Olga Bozianova starr.