Hollywood on Conrad and Neaughr

"DANGEROUS PARADISE" (Paramount, 1929; released 1930) Directed by William Wellman; Scenario by Grover Jones and William Slavens Holmtrum from "Victory" by Joseph Conrad; Camera, Archie Stout; Song by Leo Robin and Richard Whiting; produced under the title "Flesh of Eve"; also released in a silent version; 59 minutes


The works of Joseph Conrad, with the surface color and melodrama, and their underlying complexities, have always presented something of a problem to movie-makers. Film them faithfully, and they are potentially uncommercial; jazz them up with boxoffice elements and they are scarcely worth doing. With the exception of Carol Reed's brilliant "Outcast of the Islands", by far the most successful of all adaptations of Conrad's work, the record is not a particularly encouraging one. Neither version, silent or sound, of "Lord Jim" was very good; "The Secret Agent", filmed as "Sabotage", was brilliant Hitchcock but only casual Conrad; Herbert Brenon's "The Rescue" was a good film and a fine Ronald Colman vehicle, but again Conrad was pushed into the background; "Silent Treasure" (from "Nostromo") and "Road to Romance" (from "Romance") are both unavailable for reappraisal. That leaves "Victory", the only Conrad novel to be filmed three times: disappointingly, in 1919 by Maurice Tourneur, this early talkie - the only time Conrad was reduced to "B" picture level - and faithfully but rather stolidly by John Cromwell in 1940. This latter was a surprisingly short but extremely well cast version, with a beautiful study in villainy by Sir Cedric Hardwicke.

"Dangerous Paradise", which at least has the diplomacy not to billed itself as an adaptation of "Victory", merely saying in the credits that it is adapted from incidents in "a" Conrad novel, was clearly not made out of any great desire to bring literary culture to the screen in 1930. The transition to sound was a difficult period in many ways, not least in the selection of properties, since the art of screen-writing fell and the old and new faculties were totally new, and presented the screen-writer with more or less confrontations of actors, cameramen or directors. Small wonder then that many companies fell back on properties that they already owned, that they had filmed before, and that were based on novels or plays with much of the writing already accomplished for them. "Dangerous Paradise", rather than being a property that Paramount owned, and one full of rich characters and good dialogue, was also a tale that could be told essentially visually and thus released in a silent version as well. Purely as a film, it is extremely well-acted, with none of the stiffness that many early talkies; presumably the silent version was virtually identical since it ran only a couple of minutes longer, the added length no doubt due to the extra footage taken up by titles.

William Wellman, the director, and Richard Arlen (given only featured billing) had only three years earlier made one of Paramount's biggest successes, "Wings"; here all the billing goes to Nancy Carroll, Paramount's new star. (However, Wellman regained his lost prestige the following year with "The Public Enemy", and was soon established as a major director of talkies). "Dangerous Paradise", shown of all character complexity and subtle motivations, is admittedly little more than a caricature of Conrad's original. Everything is done to concentrate on the color, the action, the movement, with a happy ending substituted for the original tragic one. It's a comic-strip adaptation of Conrad - yet at that, it automatically had more built-in values than similar comic-strip movies with actors of the distinguished ancestry. One is appalled by the cavalier treatment of one's authority at the same time one must consider that the end results are undoubtedly superior than a hack work "created" by a studio writer to fill the same need for mass produced merchandise. It is admittedly not a film that bears repeated viewings. The first time around the sense of outrage, plus the rich melodramatics, make it an enjoyable slice of hokum; the second time around, when the shocks and surprises have subsided, it becomes less interesting. But, after all, this kind of film was never made to be seen twice - or even really noticed once. While it is under way, it is entertaining enough. The production mountings are economical but more than adequate, with Catalina doubling as a location spot once again; Nancy Carroll's charm more than makes up for the wooden quality of Richard Arlen, and the choice villainies are quite spectacular - with Warner Oland and Gustav von Seyffertitz coming remarkably close to Conrad's conceptions.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION
Hardly an "A" production, "The Narrow Corner" is an excellent example of the many first-class "programmers" that were made (especially by Warners) in the early 30's, with its scenes designed to serve as second features. The story, set in mountainous, remote corners of the U.S., with its strong cast and a plot involving commercial risk, often good enough to take off unexpectedly and eclipse the boxoffice and artistic success of much more important films. Short and disciplined, they also afforded good directors (Dieterle, Allman, Curtiz, Green, Del Ruth) the opportunity both to experiment with technique and to develop their own styles. (Together, they comprise a valuable body of work. Many of them have been included in prior series here; and others like them can be seen in the current Warner Brothers series at the Museum of Modern Art.)

From 1915 to date, there have been more than 30 movie adaptations of Naugah's novels and plays, two of them ("Rain" and "Of Human Bondage") having been filmed three times each, a number of others ("The Beachcomber"). "The Letter", "The Narrow Corner") rating two versions, and most of the others ("The Magician", "The Razor's Edge" etc.) being filmed once only. The second version of "The Narrow Corner" was made only three years later as a routine vehicle under the title "Isle of Fury" and starring Henry Fonda. A little gem from the wider-open pre-Code era, "The Narrow Corner" is one of those curious films that is so good that one just cannot understand either its obscurity or its lack of reputation; nobody seems to have heard of it except those of us who saw it originally and never forgot it. Not that it is a filmic classic; Alfred E. Green has always been a good and under-rated director, and this film is well up to his standards, but it scores mainly on its literary merits, both those of Naugah's original (published in 1932) and those of Pecseny's faithful and creative screenplay. Absurd though the suggestion may sound, much of the screenplay seems to be an improvement, richening some of the characterization and the choice, gutsiest lines that seem so "typically Naugah" aren't to be found in his original novel at all, but are brilliant extensions. And they work doubly well because the film is so well cast: the Dudley Digges, Arthur Hohl and William V. Long roles could almost have been written by Naugah with those actors in mind. The original novel, true, is given more to philosophising than melodrama and most of it in typical Naugah style, is told only in the past tense, in the course of ultra-detailed, yet conversational, biographical portraits of himself that Naugah worked into most of his stories. Even when there is a logical place (and need) for straightforward descriptive narrative, Naugah gives us a literary fadeout and then recounts what happened in still another conversation. The book is thus read quickly and easily, but without the excitement of the strong story reaching its full potential; also a major portion is devoted to the young hero's tumultuous affair with the wife of a politician, a sequence handled in the film in one deft and brisk flashback. Because the film is slick and fast-paced and plays up the limited action content, as well as making the most of the exotic locations (Catalina Island once again doubling for Baliys) it may well suggest the assembly-line "popularising" of a literary work, but this is far from the case. It's one of the most faithful of all Naugah adaptations. The ending admittedly is a compromise, a typically Hollywood fadeout as opposed to the book in which the amoral heroine is just discarded, and the hero meets an ambiguously described and meaningless death "off-page". Yet it doesn't really seem to matter; the book's tragic ending had no more significance than the film's happy one, and this is hardly rates as a betrayal. Characters take over from plot anyway, and it has been a long time since we saw a movie with so many rich, marvellously drawn and flawlessly acted portraits, and with such a perfect extension of Naugah's bare-bones dialogue into a series of pithy and sometimes eyebrow raising lines. It's good to see the always interesting Patricia Ellis in a solid role too. Incidentally, while "Outcast of the Islands" is unquestionably a finer film, it's interesting to note that a major production like that could still come up with only barely acceptable matte work and obvious tricks in its navigating-the-channel sequence. Compare it with the beautifully staged and cut miniature work in a similar sequence in "The Narrow Corner", with its greater camera mobility, variety of angle and skilled knowledge of just when to cut away from a miniature after achieving the desired effect but before giving the game away!

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