The huge success of "Mutiny on the Bounty" in 1935 (and with "Captain Blood" an added incentive) prompted production of a small but elaborate cycle of historical sea adventures in the latter part of the 30's, a cycle that included such films as deMille's "The Buccaneer" and Frank Lloyd's "Rulers of the Sea". Tonight's films are a part of that cycle, and while both films have common denominators (a similar theme, a fire at sea as a highlight) and are both from the same year - emphasizing a certain standardization even in epics - they are both solid, handsomely made and expertly cast works; their similarity of content more of an academic asset than a liability.

"SLAVE SHIP" (20th Century Fox, 1937) Directed by Tay Garnett; produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; Associate Producer, Nummally Johnson; Original Story by William Faulkner; Screenplay by Sam Hellman, Lamar Trotti and Gladys Lehman; Art Director, Hans Peters; Camera, Ernest Palmer; Musical Score, Alfred Newman; 10 reels


"THE HIGHEST LOVE ... THE LOWEST MEN THE SEVEN SEAS HAVE EVER KNOWN MUTINY! Gold-mad, blood-mad cut-throats defying the gallows, doomed unless they smash a love that dared a HONEYMOON OF HORROR!"

They don't write advertising catch-lines like that any more (and that was just the opening blast of one of Fox's standard ads!) and, more to the point, they don't make the films to go along with them! "Slave Ship" was intended as a bigger and better than average programmer, and succeeded rather well in that aim. Today it is quite staggering to find such a cast, such photography and such production values in a film of no great importance. Despite some slow spots in the middle sections, it still impresses and manages to be a thrilling and not too predictable piece of melodrama. Warner Baxter never seemed really at home in some of the adventure films in which Fox cast him, but he gives his usual sincere if rather stolid performance, and it is a very real pleasure to see the lovely Elizabeth Allan again. Beery is on top form in his standard Long John Silver good badman role, and has some delightful lines about some native boys he once had to eat when the food ran out! The supporting cast is full of old favorites (some of whom turn up in the co-feature too) although Miles Kendr's fleeting appearances as little more than an extra suggest that he may have been a casualty of last-minute cutting. Those of you who recall 1935's "Dante's Inferno" (which we run a few weeks back) may note the overlapping photographic treatment in the scenes of the slaves in the hold, and the re-use of the same musical motif, here employed as a "chant of misery". Although Tay Garnett has never really played into the hands of the auteurs, adherents of that theory will certainly find echoes of other Garnett films here in specific favorite compositions, re-use in familiar context of certain players (the trio of saloon singers for example) and the overall cheerfully sadistic exuberance which puts Garnett very much into the Raoul Walsh echelon.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

"SOULS AT SEA" (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Henry Hathaway; Screenplay by Dale Van Every and Grover Jones from an original story by Ted Lesser; Camera, Charles Lang Jr., Art Direction, Hans Dreier and Roland Anderson; Special Effects, Gordon Jennings; Musical Director, Boris Morros; Songs, Ralph Rainger and Leo Robin; 10 reels

While Paramount's "B" films of the 30's were often genuinely superior products, offering outstanding production values and often daring and offbeat subject matter, they were much more conservative - and economy-conscious - with their "A" product. "Souls at Sea" bears some of the typical signs of Paramount caution: while a big production, it is also quite a measured one. The authentic sea scenes are limited, and much of the narrative is told via conversations in court-room, cabins, or small rooms. And just when the plot really gets absorbing, and interesting moral issues are raised as well as purely melodramatic ones, the plot neatly side-steps them. (The much later Tyrone Power film, "Abandon Ship", in a sense picks up where "Souls at Sea" leaves off in this respect). But otherwise, it is a very definite cut above the average Paramount spectacular like "Wells Fargo", and though slow-moving, it is always very satisfying. The sets, without being very elaborate, have a solid and convincing look to them. The art direction is good, and the frequent placing of the set (and/or the camera) at an angle sustains the illusion of being at sea most of the time, even when there are only occasional cutaways to the ocean. And the action climax when it comes, is beautifully staged and edited, a thoroughly professional mixture of live action, special effects, studio expertise and first-rate stunt work. The cast too is virtually hand-picked, with Olympe Bradna (whose career never seemed to get anywhere) being especially touching in her freshness and poignancy.

The print alas, has not weathered the years too well. When received it was dirty and ragged; it has been cleaned and spruced up, but splits remain splice, and there are a couple of rather untidy sequences - happily not at key moments. On the whole we have been very lucky with print quality in this series, so I suppose we must bear with the occasional sub-standard copy in a good grace.

Wm. K. Everson