
Donald Henderson Clarke's mildly notorious novels (four were filmed in 1930-1931), then no more until 'The Houskeeper's Daughter' in 1939) always ran into more censorship problems than their limited literary values warranted, and few films, 'The Maiden' has a little-change which in itself indicates the severe toning-down the property underwent. It was Whale's first film after "Frankenstein", and clearly is not really his forte -- though that early in his career nobody could be blamed for not knowing just where that forte lay. Actually, it's a film that seems much better on a second viewing. So used have we become to expecting the best from Whale's lesser-known films -- "One More River", "By Candlelight" and "A Kiss Before the Mirror" were all gems -- that one automatically anticipates a great deal, and "The Impatient Maiden" is, one is forced to admit, one of his weaker films and an initial disappointment. Yet Whale has obviously inserted a great deal of personal style into it in an effort to beef it up. The macabre sense of humor in the hospital scenes for example; his way of theatrically staging many dialogue scenes by a window (one of them, in a hospital, even has the sinister and unlikely shadow of a dead-looking Frankensteinian tree across the drawn blinds); and above all his constantly mobile camera. At least one of the sets, an incredibly elaborate horizontally-partitioned apartment, was obviously designed just to allow the camera to sweep through its walls in the deliberately theatrical manner so typical of Whale. "If it tends to disappoint, the first time, partly due to the lack of substance in the film's plot, it comes to life much more the second time around; there is real warmth and easy grace in the performances, especially those of Lee Clarke and John Halliday, and for a plot with little real incident, it moves at a physically brisk pace. The climactic operation sequence is particularly well lit and cut, and has all the crispness of contemporary (and much bloodier!) operation sequences. In rather typical 1931 fashion, characters are forced to turn on the radio when there is no need for background music, but there is no curious use of familiar English theme music during the main and end titles. It's hard to be unoptimally positive on this, Whale appears to have inserted himself as an extra into several of the crowd scenes. In any event, it's good to cross off one more elusive title. Now only 'Journey's End' and "Waterloo Bridge" remain -- and we hope to have the former quite soon.

... 10 Minute Intermission ...

FRENCH WITHOUT TEARS (Paramount-British, 1939) Directed by Anthony Asquith and Ian Dalrymple; produced by Mario Zampi; Screenplay by Anatole DeGrunwald and Ian Dalrymple from the play by Terrence Rattigan; Camera, Bernard Knowles; Supervising Editor, David Lean; Original length: 85 minutes; US length, 67 minutes (see notes below).

With Ray Milland, Ellen Drew, Janine Darcey, Roland Culver, Ellen Drew, David Tree, Jim Gerald, Guy Middleton, Kenneth Lorgan, Margaret Yarde, Toni Gable.

"French Without Tears" is the kind of elegant, civilised, pre-war froth that can never be recreated and will probably never be written again because the milieu that produced it (and films like Lubitsch's "Bluebeard's Eighth Wife") has gone forever. One can't really complain at its passing since it would be pointless for anyone to try to write this kind of material in the 70's, and even if he did, there would just be no audience for it. But in its original, highly artificial form, this kind of thing does still hold up rather well. Noel Coward's comedies have been enjoying a whole new vogue on the London stage, and the French "It's Out Tears" was such a surprise hit in a recent London revival that there are plans for a New York opening in the very near future. Among the many more substantial Rattigan writings it's only a trifle -- but it perfectly embodies the spirit of the time in which it was made. Within a few months of its release, it was already obsolete, the characters, the location, the way of life (unreal to begin with admittedly) crashed out of existence by the wave of Intemperate Intemperance during the war, London's leading art theatre, the Studio One -- revived the film for a long, profitable run with Carmel's "Le Jour Se Leve", one of the last great and traditional French films to get out of the country before the occupation. The double-bill thus enabled wartime Londoners to look back on a period of innocence that was gone for all time, and a classic style of film-making that so belonged to the 30's that it too could never really come back. (Over....)
Despite some late silents in which he showed a pronounced visual flair, Anthony Asquith had, by the mid-30's, devoted himself to concentrating on literary and especially theatrical properties. He feverishly attempted to disguise their origins, or to "open them up", but he brought such taste and menace to them he never became "starey". There are a couple of establishing shots in "French Without Tears" -- a ship at sea, a train arriving at a station - but otherwise it remains resolutely a filmed play. There are no attempts to make the sets look real, and backgrounds are patently artificial. One interlude by a river makes no effort to exploit the freedom and space of the scene, and could just as well have been done on an interior set. But the film moves in an entirely cinematic way; there are some effective crane shots, and a beautifully edited carnival sequence. "Without tallowin; with the drama tie structure of the original, Asquith - as he did also in "The Inslow Boy", "The Importance of Being Ernest", "Cottage to Let" and many others - manages to transfer it all into thoroughly filmic terms.

The film was made in Britain by Paramount, as part of the system which required American film companies releasing films in Britain to produce a certain number of films in Britain. The laws, instituted in 1927, were sensibly revised in 1937 to encourage better production and not just quickies. If a company made a good film, the number of films it had to make could be reduced. "French "Out of Tears" was a reasonably important film, and certainly no quickie. However, it's total lack of a reputation in America - and the apathy which always greeted its mention - was hard to understand until - alas - tonight. On receiving the print, I realized for the first time that the American release prints were wrongly out. (It was too late at that juncture to cancel the booking and announce a substitute). The cutting is hard to understand, since the film is so thoroughly British that it could never have been of value in the mass American market, even with an example of respectable Hollywood names, and one would have thought that Paramount would have released it as was, hoping to gain a modicum of bookings from the small art-house circuit. Instead they chose to cut it down to a second feature, and most of the editing (some 18 minutes were removed in all) consisted of removing the last act of the play!! In a trifle of this sort, carefully paced and structured for a climactic payoff, the effect is ruinous. Ellen Drew, not a lady, not a tramp, but something in between, quite fickle, ruthless and self-centred, apart most of the others trying to entice the various men surrounding her. Towards the end, she apparently succeeds in convincing Ray Milland of her genuine love for him. Embrace, fadeout; and a monumentally anti-climactic End title. In the full version, Milland's relief rally round to rescue him. Lord comes of the impending arrival of a wealthy young Lord, and the girl thereupon discards the hero in order to set her cap for the titled millionaire. With much ceremony, his car finally arrives, and out steps a top-hatted lady who is the girl with the proverbial egg on her face. Apart from not ringing true, the current ending just has no punch at all, and is certainly a let-down from the unhilarious but often very engaging comedy that has preceded it.

Seeing the film as is, is rather like cutting off "The Magnificent Ambersons" before Tim Holt gets his "comeuppance". Nevertheless, the pleasing comedy-of-manners still has its considerable moments, most of them supplied by the beautiful comic performances of Roland Culver and David Tree, who quite steal the limelight away from Ray Milland, who perhaps tries to inject too many comedy Mammerisms into what is a fairly straight role. Ellen Drew, not very becoming as a blonde (possibly or even probably a deliberate ploy to make the character seem less sympathetic) does rather give the impression of being aware of the honor a big Hollywood star as bestowing by descending to appear in a lowly British movie - but she soon learned that she would never be a "big" star, and happily settled into a useful and often effective niche in films like Preston Sturges' "Christmas in July".

Despite the damage done to it, "French "Out of Tears" is still quite an engaging frolic; but in fairness to Battigan's writing skill, a visit to the still very funny play (which was also diluted a bit for the movie anyway) is very much recommended.

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