Two successors to Mary Pickford in an afternoon of charm and whimsy

DADDY LONG LEGS (Fox, 1931) Directed by Alfred Santell; scenario by Sonya Levien and S. M. 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 today's film is one of the most enjoyable and typical (if least elaborate and pretentious) from that brief but profitable reign. Its basis, of course, on one of the most popular of the simple yet enjoyable books of Jean Webster. Unlike the books of Lloy Douglas (an author who enjoyed particular acclaim, 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 key ingredients of its charm. Stories like that need above all else genuine honesty in their sentiments (enough discipline not to exploit and vulgarise 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 clichés to occur or to be predicted. "Daddy Long Legs" fills these easier-said-than-done stricture rather nicely, and is certainly helped along by the charm and grace of Janet Gaynor. At the time the mildly "jazzed-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. This afternoon'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

PETER 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 Hallow (Mrs. Darling), Cyril Chadwick (Mr. Darling), Anna May Wong (Tiger Lily); George Ali (Nana), Virginia Brown Faire (Tinker Bell); Phillipe 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. Not too
surprisingly, no film, TV or (recent) stage versions 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, Miss 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 that could
not also take place on stage. (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-Brenon-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 joy -- 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 facile pantomime and expressive face, and her ability to switch effortlessly
from mischief and fun to abject pathos, 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,
did 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. No-
body ever stood much of a chance against this wily old scene-stealer, and new-
comer 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.

William K. Everson