SOAP OPERAS WITH STYLE

The overall collective title for Film Series 18 was "Larger than Life" - a collection of films illustrating (primarily) personalities, though also genres, that were bigger than reality. The Soap Opera is certainly such a genre. It should be admitted right away that it is a self-limiting genre; no great or even important films have ever come out of the category. If, by chance or design, a potential soap opera - by virtue of honesty, sensitivity or sincerity of performance - lifts itself up by its own bootstraps to become a "Love Affair" or a "One Way Passage", then it is no longer a soap opera. Obviously influenced by the radio soap-operas of the 30's, the filmed soap-operas (likewise very largely limited to the 30's) are characterized mainly by the facile manipulation of characters who follow a tearful path to a neat and usually satisfactory ending, and by pat, artificial, novelettish dialogue. The silent film, by virtue of its lack of dialogue, was fortunate in being able to avoid this pitfall, and of course fortunate too in not having a successful radio formula to copy. Because, audiences had to supply much of the emotion themselves, such silent films as "Smouldering Fires" - potential soap-opera material - often had genuine subtlety and emotional depth. Unlike the Western, an equally popular genre but one capable of greatness and poetry, the soap opera has to be enjoyed purely on its own superficial level. With a skilled director, production lushness and beautiful people in the leads, the genre can be extremely entertaining and rewarding - as in Clarence Brown's "Wife Versus Secretary", with Gable, Loy, Harlow and Stewart. To expect more would be as bad a mistake as to approach the soap opera purely in a spirit of novelty, or, in regrettable contemporary parlance, as "camp." Tonight's two films are very typical soap operas of the thirties.

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BORN TO BE BAD (20th Century-United Artists, 1934) Directed by Lowell Sherman; A Joseph Schenck presentation of a Darryl F. Zanuck production; Screenplay by Ralph Graves and Harrison Jacobs from an original story by Graves, Camera, Barney McGill; Music, Alfred Newman; 6 reels With Loretta Young, Cary Grant, Jackie Kelk, Henry Travers, Russell Hopton, Andrew Tombes, Howard Lang, Harry Green, Marion Burns, Paul Harvey, Charles Coleman, Matt Briggs, Geneva Mitchell.

The last film made by the distinguished actor-director Lowell Sherman (he died shortly afterwards, having established himself as one of the better and more sophisticated directors of the early 30's), "Born to Be Bad" suffered from the increasingly rigorous application of the new rulings set down by the Production Code. It was heavily cut and re-shaped on its completion, hence its surprisingly short running time of only 61 minutes. Solidly produced, its main interest obviously is in the playing of Cary Grant and Loretta Young. The child who is the object of all the marital bickering frankly seems like a selfish brat who really isn't worth all the fuss, but it really isn't his fault that the script saddles him with situations where the audience (let alone a depression-era audience) is expected to sympathize with him because he isn't going to get the pony he has just been promised. There are some quite gutty elements to the plot, and the climax is quite surprising, but its relation to reality is virtually nil.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

BETWEEN TWO WOMEN (MGM, 1937) Directed by George B. Seitz; screenplay by Frederick Stephani and Marion Parsonnet from the story "General Hospital" by Erich von Stroheim; Camera, John Seitz; Art Director, Cedric Gibbons; Musical Score, Dr. William Axt; P tunage, John Hoffman; 8 reels With Franchot Tone, Maureen O'Sullivan, Virginia Bruce, Leonard Penn, Cliff Edwards, Janet Beecher, Charlie Grapewin, Edward Norris, Helen Troy, Grace Ford, June Clayworth, Anthony Nace, Barbara Bedford, Dennis O'Keefe, Edward Le Saint, Selmer Jackson, E. Alyn Warren, Faye McLaren, Billy Dooley, Pat Collins.

Note: this print is somewhat exaggeratedly retitled "Surrounded By Women", this to avoid confusion with MGM's later "Between Two Women", a post-Kildare programmer, and not a remake. When one company has two films with the same title on its backlog for television, the title of the earlier one is invariably changed.

Although "Between Two Women" is an entertaining enough film on its own, obviously its presence on our program is occasioned by the opportunity to fill in one more minor gap in our knowledge of the work of Erich von Stroheim, who wrote the original story. Obviously he had no say over how his story was treated, and probably had no much wish. MGM, turning out
glossies for the family market, probably changed and modified it far more
than perhaps Warner Brothers might have done. Notorious for " fussing," MGM
may well have changed not only the script, but also the completed film too.
Director George B. Seitz, an efficient director of actioners ("The Vanishing
American," "Kit Carson") and family comedies ("The Hardy Films") is hardly
the kind of director to have fought for the material or the style of Stroheim's
original ideas. With a film like this, not even of major importance to
Stroheim himself, one can only make guesses. But knowing more of Stroheim's
work now than we did then, we can make some fairly reliable guesses.
He wrote the story, based on personal observations, during a time when his
wife was in hospital as the result of an explosion and burns which left her
disfigured. (He no longer loved his wife, but was loyal to her in her
misfortune). Therefore the part of the story that parallels this may be
attributed to Stroheim. One can also stretch a point I think and see some autobiographical attitudes in the Tone
character: an idealistic doctor so dedicated to his work that it wrecks
his life is not so far removed from an idealistic film director so
dedicated to his work that -- etc. etc. In the opening montage of
hospital life (much longer and more detailed, one suspects, in the original
story) there are one or two touches very typical of Stroheim, most
especially a life/death juxtaposition (the pregnant wife going into the
delivery room, while the priest fresh from a death-bed snuffs out a
combat, a moment of double-aged sadness since it implies the death of the
young wife too) that recall a similar contrast in "Greed" (the wedding/
funeral scene). As also in "Greed" and "Walking Down Broadway" and "The
Devil Doll" too there is the playing of an important but despairing scene
against a background of Christmas tinsel and gaiety. During the train
wreck sequence, as the hospital swings into action, there is a strong hint
of the documentary qualities that Stroheim frequently injected into his
literature in the material that was to follow. True, these are only hints and
nuances -- but they are enough to suggest that some of Stroheim remains,
and that quite possibly a film of some integrity could have been made from
his original story.
One thing that I'm quite sure that did not originate with Stroheim is its
total disregard of the facts and economics of life. The script makes a
token effort to explain the difficulties of an intern's existence. Tone
has to explain that he cannot possibly marry since he only makes $60
a month. Pointedly, he is shown buying his wife's wedding ring on a long-
range installment plan. But on what is left from that small salary, he
still manages to buy a house that is an art director's dream, buy a car
(his wife already has one!), hire a maid, and sport a new suit and a fresh
haircut in every scene. These of course, by Hollywood standards, were the
rock-bottom essentials of life, and so: how many small the salary, one
somehow had to acquire them? As a soap opera, it is clearly influenced
by the 30's trend to make the idealistic doctor the Huxley stock dramatic hero
to try and catch the mood and influence of the tor-tor-explorer hero
who dominated the immediate post-Lindbergh era. From "Arrowsmith" in the
early 30's, through the popular and much filmed works of Cronin and Lloyd
Douglas, the dedicated (and fortunately medically non-explicit) doctor
dominated the Hollywood scene of the 30's. The characters in all of the
medical soap operas were virtually inter-changeable. For example, here
Virginia Bruce is the society girl who takes doctor-away from nurse; that
same year in "Wife Doctor and Nurse" over at Fox, she was the long-
suffering nurse who lost doctor Warner Baxter to society girl Loretta
Young. (Fox was even less concerned with reality than MGM; MGM carefully
manipulated all of the characters to a predetermined end, turning
Virginia Bruce from a nice girl to a bitch for no apparent reason, so as to
solve the web of problems. Fox on the other hand, and especially in "Wife
Doctor and Nurse," just pretended that the problem didn't exist, and wound
up with a most dubious menage-a-trois!)
"Between Two Women," is a well-mounted piece, no cheapie, but more
economical than it looks too. Some of the bigger sets (the ballroom etc.)
are actually done via faked glass shots -- and well done too. The train
wreck footage is obviously stock, so is one quick scene of an automobile
crashing into a man in the street. It's taken from the 1933 film "The
Nuisance," and Lee Tracy can be glimpsed briefly in the shot. (Oddly
enough, in the original it was supposed to be a fake accident, and some of
that quality does come through even in the out-of-context use of the
scene). In any event, tonight's double-bill does give us an enjoyable chance to look at some very handsome faces in worlds that never
existed -- but probably should have.

--- William K. Everson ---
At our final program in the current series -- two weeks from tonight
the Summer schedule will be available.