Two major silent personalities in out-of-sound films

REACHING FOR THE MOON (United Artists, 1931) Directed by Edmund Goulding;
Presented by Joseph M. Schenck; story by Edmund Goulding, Irving Berlin
and Elsie Janis; Camera, Ray June and Robert Planck; Production Design,
William Cameron Menzies; Music, Irving Berlin; Musical Director, Alfred
Newman; 7 reels

When it first appeared, "Reaching for the Moon" disappointed the public.
Naked far more as a musical, it was - like many others of its ilk - cut and
reshaped when the musical vogue appeared to be over, and many films were
indeed being advertised as "Not a musical". Almost all of the songs
disappeared, and the lovely title number remains only as a theme music,
and as the tail end of a dance number. Then too, with Fairbanks' big swashbucklers
so fresh in the memory, its severely limited acrobatics seemed quite tame.
Today however, when one can look back on the very early 30's with new
perspective (and realize how fresh and fast this film was when compared with
many of its contemporaries) and too when we judge Fairbanks by his whole
career and not just by his cloak-and-sword specialties of the 20's, it takes on
a whole new set of values.

For one thing, Doug is back in his old stride again. He has all the zing and
pep that he exuded in his early modern comedies, those thirty-odd lively,
satirical and acrobatic comedies that he leaped and grinned his way through
as the All-American Superman between 1916 and 1920, when he turned
impressario as well as performer, doubled the length and size of his films,
and halved their vitality. This "Reaching for the Moon" is a logical
extension of the film of the same title (but not the same plot) that he made
in England in 1917, the passage of time being emphasized only by the fact that Doug is
now a brash self-made millionaire instead of a super-optimist on the way to
becoming one. Even his voice seems just right for this character - it may
not have the Colman ring that one would expect of a talkie D'Artagnan, but
it has the perfect youthful ebullience and inoffensive bombast of the
millionaire who never grew up. The restrained acrobatics disappoint, true,
but only because they're not really needed. Doug gives the film all the
dynamics it needs in voice and gesture; the odd leaps are merely added
punctuation. One would like to see Doug the athlete at full powers or not
at all, but it's a minor quibble since the film has much to offer quite
apart from Doug and the beauty and vivacity of Bebe Daniels. There's Edward
Everett Horton in one of his funniest roles, getting away with blue jokes
and outrageous innuendo right and left, before the Production Code inhibited
him and made him the perfect Gentleman's Gentleman for Fred Astaire. There's
a youthful Bing Crosby, and some beautiful but masculine girls to contribute to
the dominance of decidedly off-beat sexual humor. (One double entendre
is so outrageous one still wonders if it was intended that way!) However,
the homosexual humor is tasteful and funny, as it often was in that period;
one has only to look at such contemporary comedies as 'Sherlock Holmes'
Smarter Brother" to realize the lack of taste - and humor - in much of such
comedy today. And far from least, there are the spacious modernistic sets
and art-deco designs of William Cameron Menzies (five years before he made
"Things To Come"), whose bizarre penthouses, luxury-liner interiors and
non-mov ing seascapes add a deliberate touch of determined unreality that
offsets the then very topical reality of the depression. Suicide and
financial ruin are plot ingredients, but Fairbanks and Menzies prevent your
ever taking them too seriously. But they do ask you to take the occasional
sentiment seriously - and those heartless wretches who like to show their
own 70's sophistication by laughing at open and honest 30's sentiment will
find themselves put in their place by Doug's own on-screen remark: "You're
laughing at me - that's cruel and despicable!"

The Players: Douglas Fairbanks, Bebe Daniels, Edward Everett Horton, Jack
Mulhall, Emmett Corrigan, Claude Allister, June MacCloy, Helen Jerome Eddy,
Bing Crosby, Walter Hulker, Larry Steers, Bill Elliott, Dennis O'Keefe.

-- 10 minute Intermission --
THE CAT'S PAW (Fox, 1934) Direction and screenplay by Sam Taylor, from an original story by Clarence Budington Kelland; Camera, Jack Mackenzie; Musical Score, Alfred Newman; songs and lyrics, Harry Akst; NY premiere, Radio City Music Hall; 12 reels. (see note below).


While today "The Cat's Paw" may seem to be Lloyd's major mistake in the sound era, it was well received in 1934, both by critics and by audiences. It would seem though that Paramount had misgivings about it, and it is surely no coincidence that it is the only one of Lloyd's 50's films not to be handled by Paramount. Presumably with the Marx Brothers, Fields, Mae West (and Ernst Lubitsch) at their peak, Paramount felt no need for a comedy of lesser stature, whereas Fox, always weak on comedy, were probably happy to add it to their schedule. The film is a curious foray into the world of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges, though in fairness to Lloyd, this was before either Capra or Sturges took on political satire. The Kelland story suggests Capra, and the lead is clearly a Gary Cooper/James Stewart type, but at the time it must have seemed a good deal fresher than it does now. Whatever its shortcomings, it was no accident. Lloyd's prior film, "Movie Crazy" of two years earlier, had contained far more traditional sight gag material and Lloyd announced that this would be a different kind of film for him, avoiding sight gags and working rigorously to a script (for only the second time. (Presumably, though he didn't say so, "The Freshman" was the first). One must give him credit for trying something new, and perhaps for pulling it off in 1934. And -- in all fairness -- there are those who are very fond of it today. Lloyd films depend so much on audience reaction -- and he was usually so shrewd in judging that reaction -- that it is always unwise to predict or pre-judge. The current political circus in New York may also restore some measure of topicality to the film too!

But for all of its ideas and fresh approaches, and allowing for that audience response breathing more life into it, it is all rather dull to the facts that it is very talkative, very long, and only spasmodically funny. It's officially a 12-reel film, and so identified on the leaders of the print, but in actual footage it works out to a very full nine reels, so possibly Lloyd did engage in substantial last-minute cutting. It comes to life in the climax, but even here there is less of the exuberance of the traditional Lloyd finale. It also gradually reveals itself as another one of those Fascist-inclined early talkies that keep re-appearing ("The Star Witness", "OK America", "Gabriel Over the White House", "The President Vanishes", "This Day and Age") and advocating police-state methods to combat gangsterism and political corruption. That Lloyd's methodology turn out to be a joke doesn't in any way lessen the bite of this sequence. It's a quiet, leisurely but ambitious film, and despite its humdrum pace, an entertaining one. What it lacks in expected humor it makes up for with its unorthodox contribution to film history. And it's particularly good to see part and appealing Una Merkel in a decent, non- dizzy-blonde role once again.

William K. Everson

Note: a listing of the Fall schedule will be published with next week's program notes.