DIAMOND JIM (Universal, 1935) Directed by Edward Sutherland; produced by Edmund Grainger; screenplay by Preston Sturges; adapted by Harry Coker and Doris Malloy from the book by Parker Morell; music, Franz Waxman; camera, George Robinson; 9 reels


Even though as romanticised as most screen biographies, "Diamond Jim" is quite one of the best examples of its genre. Perhaps movie devotees tend to be less critical of non show-biz biographies. Unlike the horrendous and virtually fictional "biographies" we've had on Pearl White, Texas Guinan, Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields, Jean Harlow and Gable and Lombard, the biographies of men like Jim Brady don't call for such wholesale doctoring for legal reasons as those of more recent figures, nor do they represent a whole barrage of factual errors and falsifications which can be exposed only too easily by recourse to any trade reference book. By actual count, "Diamond Jim" has well over as many errors and inaccuracies as "The Buster Keaton Story" (though that seems impossible) but it looks right and sounds right, and does capture a genuine period flavor.

Other than for a contrived encounter with John L. Sullivan, there's no quite name-dropping either. In any case, Edward Arnold (who repeated the role in "Lillian Russell") is so perfectly cast as Brady, and the foresword so sensibly disarms us by admitting to the rearrangement of the chronology of Brady's life, that one can shrug off the dramatic license displayed in fitting Brady into the Edward Arnold mold. So we are not dissimilar and equally dynamic General Sutter and Jim Flake. And even when there is a departure from fact, it's not a departure from probability; for example, Kit Carson's mode of death seemed somewhat inappropriate for a frontiersman and has never been bettered. But Kit's demise was entirely appropriate for Brady, and so it is casually switched to him!

A handsome and elaborate production, "Diamond Jim" is one of the best dramatic features handled by an essentially comedy director, Edward Sutherland (represent ed next week by a silent W.C. Fields comedy) and is also one of the few Edmund Grainger productions not to show too many signs of formula and cheap economies. It does show signs of having been a much longer production that was perhaps not too imaginatively edited; careful lighting, composition and a flowing script are sometimes marred by abrupt segues from one episode to the next, and this abruptness sometimes stresses the differing influences of Preston Sturges' script: the opening, for example, suggests that he was very strongly impressed by the opening of King Vidor's "The Crowd". It's a fast-moving canvas of events, not lacking in comedy or action (a beautifully cut train wreck is a good example of the latter) but dominated by the blend of "Big" drama and pathos that, for a few years in the mid-thirties, was to be a hallmark of Edward Arnold "vehicles" while that excellent actor was at his peak. Incidentally, Edward Arnold himself has a fine score by Franz Waxman (then in his first year in Hollywood) that he had that same year by "Iride of Frankenstein" with its haunting and ponderous recurring romantic theme, and a stirring opening march which is likewise used throughout. Unfortunately Universal always cheapened their outstanding scores by absorbing them into their stock music libraries and using them promiscuously in "B" pictures; Waxman's unique march here turned up shortly thereafter in a western serial, "Flaming Frontiers"! As with all early Sturges screenplays, there is careful writing of vignettes for supporting players, and, as in "The Power and the Glory", much good solid writing which does a remarkable job of crowding a huge canvas into a tight and cohesive whole.

--- Ten minute intermission ---

THE KEY (Warner Brothers, 1934) is directed by Michael Curtiz; screenplay by Laird Doyle from a play by R. Gore Browne and J.L. Hardy; camera, Ernest Haller;ilog with William Powell, Edna Best, Colin Clive, Donald Crisp, Halliwell Hobbes, Arthur Treacher, Robert Cavanagh, Henry O'Neill, J.M. Kerrigan, Gertrude Short, Arthur Aylesworth, Maxine Doyle, Anne Shirley, Eddie Fetherston, Tom Wilson, Mary Gordon, Harry Strang, Lew Kelly, Robert Homans, Edward Van Sloan, Ethan Leidlaw. (Note: this print retitled "High Peril", to avoid confusion on tv with the William Holden-Sophia Loren "The Key").

With seven films to his credit in 1933, Curtiz dropped to a mere four in 1934, the most elaborate of them being "British Agent", but the best of them quite possibly being tonight's film. Dealing with the Irish "troubles" it invades John Ford territory before Ford really got down to it seriously. It's a fair-minded foray, determined to take no sides and create no villains, which is perfectly acceptable since it isn't really about the Irish problem, and merely uses it as an effective and dramatic background to a triangle story.

(Continued overleaf)
"The Key" is full of pleasant surprises; expected cliches never seem to materialise, and intelligent writing and acting prevents it from ever descending to a soap-opera level. It moves along briskly, and is full of good solid craftsmanship - atmospheric lighting, a mobile camera - without ever letting technique get in the way of good story-telling. Typical is the rapidly accomplished (and very brief) flashback sequence in which a pulled back camera combined with the dropping of gauzes over the camera lens could have been a very tricky and self-indulgent display of showy technique, but is handled so casually that while the mechanics are almost thrown away, the effect is not.

It's a good-looking production all the way (helped along by a brand new print) although the sets look rather too elaborate to have been constructed for a film of this limited importance, and are probably borrowed and re-dressed from another film. So well are they used however - sometimes in half-light, sometimes with the camera moving through them, frequently filled with very mobile extras - that one never really has time to study them and decide whether they are appropriately Irish or not!

William Powell's performance is quite one of his best - suave as always, yet quite touching and honest - and one doesn't really need that line about his being a Canadian to justify the Powell presence in the British army. That excellent actress Edna Best is particularly fine, and although type-cast, Colin Clive's background of men under neurotic strain - from Dr. Frankenstein and Captain Stanhope to Mr. Rochester - makes us feel that we know him thoroughly. His casual reference to "out there" - referring to the strife-torn guerrilla-warfare streets of Dublin - somehow compresses into a couple of seconds the emotion and despair of "Journey's End".

Phil Regan appears prominently in the cast, but doesn't appear. In all probability he had a song or two as an entertainer in the Music Hall/pub that was cut for lightening-up a sombre narrative. It's not merely a cut in this print, which corresponds exactly to the original release. Anne Shirley is in the cast under the name that she was still using from her child-actress days, Dawn O'Day.

William K. Everson

Next week: "Beggars of Life" (1928, directed by William Wellman) with Louise Brooks, Wallace Beery, Richard Arlen.
"It's the Old Army Game" (1926, directed by Edward Sutherland) with W.C. Fields, Louise Brooks, William Gaxton.

Piano accompaniment by Stuart Oderman