

THE VALIANT (Fox, 1929) Directed by William K. Howard; Scenario by John Hunter Booth and Tom Barry from the (1924) one-act play of the same title by Holworthy Hall and Robert Middlemass; Camera, Lucien Andriot and Glen MacWilliams; also made in a Spanish version; 60 mins. With Paul Muni (James Dyke); John Mack Brown (Robert Ward); Edith Yorke (Mrs. Douglas); Marguerite Churchill; Richard Carlyle (Chaplain); DeWitt Jennings (Warden); Clifford Dempsey (Police lieutenant); Henry Kolker (judge); and Don Terry, George Pearce.

While "Christmas Holiday" is an authentic part of the film-noir cycle, that stylistic and thematic group of films made primarily between 1941 and 1948, though extending until the end of the 50's, "The Valiant" is one of scores of films outside that period which do not fulfill all of the "requirements" of noir, yet is a decided contender for membership in the club. It's a downbeat film, admittedly of primarily academic interest today, as both director Howard's first talkie, and stage-player Muni's first film. Howard, a strong, visual silent director, obviously had trouble adapting to the sound medium - though not as much as certain other directors. Too, he made his mistakes early and learned fast. His 1932 "The Trial of Vivian Ware" is a minor masterpiece of style, and one of the fastest, slickest films ever made. That, and "The Valiant" together form an instant lesson in the problems of sound and how they were overcome; since both are melodramas, and both from the same studio, one has many common points for comparison, and since both films together run a little less than two hours, the history lesson they provide is succinct and to the point. "The Valiant" starts out with much more mobility than most 1929 films, especially those based on plays; its use of exteriors, its cutting and its lighting suggest that it is going to be quite a picture. Then the very nature of its story forces it to concentrate more and more on restricted settings and on a great deal of dialogue from Muni. Howard doesn't exactly throw in the towel, but adjusts to the fact that it's a Muni film rather than a Howard film, and at the mid-way point virtually turns the film over to Muni. It's not the kind of role Muni did best, being an introverted rather than an extroverted characterisation, and moreover he was obviously unfamiliar with film technique. But under the circumstances, Howard does well, and Muni does better than might be expected. The slow pacing of the latter portion makes it seem longer than its brief running time, but in its own way it is quite a holding and moving story, and the rest of the cast is good - especially Marguerite Churchill, quite one of the most under-rated actresses of that period. Incidentally, the film was remade by Fox in the early 40's as a rather long "B", under the title "The Man Who Wouldn't Talk", with Lloyd Nolan. Rather ingeniously it expanded itself to include a long, melodramatic wartime flashback that led to a happy ending.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY (Universal, 1944) Directed by Robert Siodmak; Produced by Felix Jackson; Screenplay by Herman J. Mankiewicz from the story by Somerset Maugham; Camera, Woody Bredell; Musical Score, Hans J. Salter; Songs: "Always" by Irving Berlin; "Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year" by Frank Loesser; 95 minutes.

With Deanna Durbin (Jackie Lamont); Gene Kelly (Robert Marnette); Simon Fenimore (Richard Whorf); Charles Mason (Dean Harens); Mrs Manette (Gale Sondergaard); Valerie (Gladys George); Gerald Tyler (David Bruce).

Although a big monetary success, largely because of its curiosity value and the publicity attendant on Deanna Durbin's first big dramatic role, both the film and Deanna received the kind of reviews which suggested that the experiment was not a successful one, and through no fault of her own, Durbin's career did not regain her last momentum. Possibly both reviewers and audiences were thrown by the film in 1944; it was early in Siodmak's career, relatively early in the film noir cycle, and much of it was probably misunderstood by the kind of audiences that saw it. Today however, while it has its flaws - most of them plot compromises imposed by the Production Code - it seems to work much better, and Durbin's performance is not only conscientious and thoughtful, but often very poignant. Kelly seems too concerned with his own image to play the role the way it should be played, Gladys George and Richard Whorf are saddled with roles that are pure 40's stereotypes, and Dean Harens is a weak hero - throwing most of the load back on to Durbin, though there's an interesting performance from Gale Sondergaard, and Siodmak manages to make much of her relationship with Kelly that the script is unable to deal with in specific terms. It's all much watered-down and changed from the Maugham original, though not to a point of butchery or distortion, and noir or not, it's a solid, craftsmanlike, glossy Hollywood film all the way - with the most uninhibited climactic use of the "Tristan and Isolde" music since the climax of Borzage's "A Farewell to Arms" in 1932. Withheld for years because of the expiry of story rights, it's a fascinating and satisfying film and a lot better than its reputation suggests.

-- William K. Everson --