
As one of the key Warner directors of the thirties, Mervyn LeRoy was by now gradually settling down to being a little less of a work-horse. He'd made seven films in 1931, six in 1932, five in 1933 and now, only three in 1934. But he was still a good company man who'd take what he was given, and though he had "Little Caesar" and "I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang" behind him, and "Oil For the Lamps of China" and "Anthony Adverse" - two of the company's biggest - coming up, he still didn't balk at being handed a humble G reel programmer like this one. Nor, must it be added, did he particularly exert himself on its behalf! It's a stage adaptation and makes little attempt to hide it, although its compression and tautness does give it a kind of rough power. It almost seems at times like a dry run for "The Petrified Forest" with a little of "Grand Hotel" thrown in, and its pervading air of entrapment and futility certainly entitles it to be considered an early and unofficial member of the film noir category. It was the first film under a new contract designed to give Alina MacMahan starring roles, but nothing very exciting emerged from the process due primarily to the fact that she was easily (and profitably) cast in key (if stereotyped) supporting roles in films like "Five Star Final" but was a difficult personality to place in starring roles. The supporting cast is full of familiar names and a few doctors however about the dire possibilities involved in the meagre a-tilos that had Frank Fenton, Donnelly and Farrell across the countryside! The film, which opened at the Kaitlo, received somewhat lukewarm reviews, but then so did the original play. The film was remade by Warners in 41 as "Highway West" (with Brenda Marshall, Arthur Kennedy, Olyma Bradna and William Lundigan), somewhat expanded and the purer morally (a marriage and a goal-break were added to the opening). But the intervening seven years didn't produce a better critical response, although they did take the film from the Kaitlo to an opening on the other side of Times Square, at the Palace.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

BLANCHE FURY (Cineguild-General Film Distributors, 1947). U.S. release by Eagle-Lion, 1948). Directed by Marc Allegret; produced by Anthony Havelock-Allan; Screenplay by Audrey Lindop and Ceci McGivern from the novel by Joseph Shearing; Camera, Guy Green and (exteriors) Geoffrey Unsworth; Production Design, John Bryan; Art Director, Wilfred Shingleton; Music, Clifton Parker; Camera operator, Oswald Morris; in Technicolor; 95 mins. With Valerie Hobson, Stewart Granger, Michael Gough, Walter Pidgeon, Maurice Denham, Cybilla Binder, Mwami Levy, Allan Jeayes, Susanne Gibbons, Ernest Jay, George Woodbridge, Arthur Wontner, Amy Veness, Clifton James, J.H. Roberts.

The best of three consecutive British films made by a noted French director, "Blanche Fury" was sold as another in a long line of "Men in Grey"-type period romances. It could be considered easily the best and certainly the most artistic and sober of that long and profitable cycle, which had started in 1943 as deliberate wartime escapism. But it came late in the day; not only was the popularity of the cycle dwindling, but in addition "Blanche Fury" was too much a period piece for this kind of a romantic. There is an excellent actress (incidentally, married to the producer) who had never had the kind of boxoffice popularity of Margaret Lockwood or Phyllis Calvert, who had starred in earlier versions. Actually, like Hollywood's "Duel in the Sun" and "Leave Her To Heaven" of the same period, it was, regardless of its cheerful Technicolor, very much of a film noir and followed most of the stylistics and plot ingredients of that school, even though its color and period setting (most film noir tended to be contemporary) made it something of a maverick. However, it survives rather well dramatically. It was based on a popular modern Gothic novel, and like a lot of 30's and 40's British popular literature, found its inspiration in the Brontes. "South Riding" (of the late 30's) is clearly a modern version of "Jane Eyre", and there are similar, though less obvious, parallels between "Blanche Fury" and "Wuthering Heights", with the Stewart Granger character's constant relation to Heathcliffe. However, what makes the film especially striking today is its evocative use of the old 3-strip Technicolor, here illustrated in a particularly fine print. Production design, sets, color and composition of the frame - with heads and figures constantly coming from the background into the foreground - all seem to have been aimed at creating an unusual sense of depth photographically. The earlier scenes in particular, in which the doctor enters the house and hurries down the corridors, or the opening of one of the scenes of one of the scenes that has totally vanished today, with Technicolor supplanted by the cheaper and easier to handle Eastmancolor, and the vibrant (if unstable) old nitrate stock, with a kind of built-in life and vitality, replaced by the safer but far less drastic acetate stock.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 11.05