An evening of Silent Melodrama

Plano Scores arranged & played by Stuart Oderman


Quite a few of the original Rin Tin Tins still exist, but alas are rarely shown. Unseen, people assume that they are something of a joke, on a par with the TV series - and their human casts have never been strong enough for any exhibitor to take a chance on them for reissue, even on a novelty basis. Invariably, when they are shown, audiences are taken by surprise with their real entertainment and production values, and if "The Night Cry" is well received tonight, Rinty will certainly bark again in future. Although it was commercially very inexpensive, the Rin Tin Tin pictures were tremendously important to Warner Brothers. They were huge money-makers (spawning rival competitors at other companies, from Universal's Dynamite to MGM's Peter the Great - a dog singularly lacking in appeal, canine or otherwise) and at Warners, often made up for the losses on the prestige films of John Barrymore. Although other Rin Tin Tin films like 'Tracking By The Police' were more elaborate and had more action, in terms of plot and overall style, "The Night Cry" might be termed the "definitive" Rinty vehicle, and thus is a good one to start out with.

Rinty was a major star, and as befits one such, quite temperamental. Only his trainer was really able to handle him, and despite his docility and charm on screen, he was quite liable to bite a chunk out of the hand that sought to give him a friendly pat when he didn't feel like it. Like all major stars, he was much sought-after for endorsements, and undoubtedly enriched the coffers of Pup-E-Ration, whose food he allegedly ate exclusively. He even went out like a star. After making a successful transition to talkies (his bark was as good as his bite) he suffered a heart-attack while gamboiling one morning, and expired in the arms of his neighbor, Jean Harlow.

In one minor sense, Rinty was an illusion. Several dogs would be used in the course of a film, some of them specialists in different kinds of stunts, but there was one basic Rin Tin Tin - and he was quite an actor. He had a way of sizing up a situation before deciding on a course of action, and his writers delighted in dreaming up situations that posed moral and psychological dilemmas for him. You get a good idea of his acting capabilities in "The Night Cry" where, in one sequence, he places his head on the table between hero and heroine - and looks soulfully from one to the other, trying to understand their attitude and also convince them of his innocence. Heroine June Marlowe, aware of what he's up to, tries to compete by making her eyes look soulful too - but she doesn't stand a chance.

Even apart from Rinty, "The Night Cry" is a vastly entertaining movie. Directed by old sentimentalist Herman Raymaker, it maintains a brisk pace all the way, and Edwin DuBarr's fine camerawork is seen to advantage in this original toned print. And its astonishing climax, with some obviously Griffith-inspired cross-cutting, is a complete throwback to Edison's "Rescued from an Eagle's Nest" of 1907. It's a real triumph of cinematic mind over matter; the plot was old-hat in 1926, but the treatment is exhilarating even today. Only in the poor matching-up of obvious studio sets (with no illusion of height) to actual exteriors, and in the rather clumsy special effects, is there any real sign of the primitive. (And the clumsiness of Rinty's final battle with the condor is probably occasioned by a deliberate attempt to avoid realism and gore, bearing in mind the family audiences that flocked to these films). John Harron (Robert's brother) is an adequate hero, but none of the humans seem to matter much. Rinty's perennial girl-friend, Manette, isn't on hand this time - but Baldy the Condor - a really vicious looking bird - makes up for her absence. "Motion Picture Magazine" of July 1926 said "Rin Tin Tin's very best picture - and that's saying a lot", while the trade paper "Film Daily" also enthused: "This is the dog picture of them all. Rinty better than ever in a dog picture that screams boxoffice from start to finish". Several reviewers commented on the incredible tension of the final reel, and of the total absorption of audiences. Pauline Kael notes, "but it was then too, never meant to be taken too seriously, but enjoyed to the hilt."

Ten Minute Intermission

SUBMARINE (Columbia, 1926) Directed by Frank Capra; produced by Harry Cohn; Scenario by Dorothy Howell from a story by Norman Springer; Camera, Joseph Walker; Asst. Director, Buddy Delamain; Music Dir. Jack Holt, Dorothy Reveler, Ralph Graven, Clarence Burton, Arthur Rankin; "Submarine" was both Columbia's and Capra's first real "A" production. (His Harry Langdon features were certainly "A" productions, but they were essentially Langdon films with Rinty, and then it was somewhat less). It had been started by Irvin Willat, an ideal director, one would have thought, for this kind of material, but Harry Cohn was dissatisfied with the film's progress, and
assigned Capra to take over. The resulting film was a resounding success, not only in a financial sense, but also in establishing Columbia as a company of at least potential prestige.

It was to be the first of a trio of service pictures that Capra, Holt and Graves were to make. (The other two: "Flight" and "Dirigible"; see the November issue of "Films in Review" for an article on these early Capras, with the stress on "Flight"). In some ways it is the weakest of the trio — it does lack, obviously, the sound effects (so important in a film like this) and the bantering dialogue. On the other hand, its bare bones plot is just that, and hardly gets in the way at all. In the other two films, plot complications were all very predictable, and audiences had to wait for them to arrive, and then wait for their solution wellowing that there could be no real surprises. Here the plot is little more than punctuation for the lengthy Naval sequences; in fact, the last half of the film is virtually all climax.

None of it is exactly overpowering today, since it has all been done many times since, but it is simple and direct, cleanly directed and photographed, with few tricks but nice little touches of Capra humanity — here still being underplayed, a virtue Capra would not retain for very long. Some of the miniature work is a little obvious, but it is still ingenious, and a credit to a small company like Columbia, which did not possess its own special effects unit as yet.

The film was originally released with a score and some sound effects, which apparently were quite effective in the closing reel (the hammering of the rescuer on the outer shell of the sub, for example). This sound material has not been lost, but is in bad shape and incomplete. It is being restored slowly, and subsequent prints of "Submarine" may be wedded to it. In the meantime, the print is fully complete and of excellent pictorial quality. It is of British origin, and the P.B.O. credits may be a little confusing. Columbia did not at that time have their own British distribution set-up, and released through PBO— who must have been delighted to get a real bonus offering like this one, and seem quite happy to let audiences assume it is one of their own productions!

Incidentally, the film was remade in 1937 as "The Devil's Playground", with perfect parallel casting in Richard Dix, Chester Morris and Dolores Del Rio. It was a well above average programmer, quite faithful to the original, though shorter and less detailed (and less grim) in its final rescue sequence. Immortality was less to be taken for granted in 1937 too, so more was made of the triangle situation — and Dolores Del Rio was more openly condemned for her behaviour, although the final outcome was the same.

William K. Everson

A note of apology and explanation for last week's projection problems. As you will undoubtedly have noticed, we had trouble keeping the right side of the screen in focus on one of our two projectors. It was apparent enough to be very irksome, not bad enough to be a disaster. Closeups were ok, but as soon as we went into long and medium shots, the loss of focus was more apparent. It is particularly unfortunate that Myrna Loy seemed to spend much of her time on THAT side of the screen.

Problems like this can be irksome, and at times unforgiveable. The Ziegfeld Theatre is currently (or at least was, until a week ago) operating with a faulty lens, so that every other reel was TOTALLY out of focus! When it creeps up on you during a show, as it did last week, it is difficult to spot the immediate cause. It could be condensation in the lamp, or as eventually proved to be the case last week, a minor oil leakage which coated the lens. Had it been of major proportions, we would have switched to running on just one projector, entailing a break in each film. As it was, until we could figure out what had gone wrong (and sometimes heat and other factors cause the problems to clear up by themselves), all we could do was to put the short reels on the afflicted projector, and the long reels on the other one, so that at least the bulk of the show was in focus. All of this is merely to explain, and primarily to emphasise that we are aware of the necessity for good focus (unlike most of the commercial theatres!) and if a problem comes up, you can be sure we are working on it. From the singular lack of outcry or individual complaint from the audience, we assume that you also knew that we were aware of it and were doing our best — so for your forebears and patience last week, we are most grateful.

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