BROADWAY BILL (Columbia, 1934) Directed by Frank Capra; screenplay by Robert Riskin based on a story by Mark Hellinger; Camera, Joseph Walker; 96 minutes

(Bremade as "Racing High" in 1950, also by Capra).


Made eight after the preceding success of "It Happened One Night", "Broadway Bill" shows signs of having been "tailored" to its status. Its original Mark Hellinger story would seem to be better suited to a brisk, 80-minute telling without the social implications and comments on wealth which are not really needed here, but which Capra adds to give his fable a little more significance. Also, it was hoped to lure Gable back to his own triumph in "It Happened One Night", and the role was written with Gable in mind. The film will exploit his screen physical and mental stamina, and kick his friends (poor Clarence Muse especially) almost to a point of losing sympathy — an attitude of aggression that would be understandable if a star with the Gable image were playing the role of a man trapped by circumstances and life, and literally hitting out as he tries to escape. But Gable's - and MGM's - enthusiasm did not match Capra's, and the role went to Warner Baxter, who spent the entire 30's being a kind of "in residence" Gable. Colman-Flynn when the script called for that sort of persona, but the budget didn't! In this case however, the compromise works, since the previous year Baxter had done "42nd Street" — and his "Broadway Bill" role calls for exactly the same kind of nervous desperation, the winning of a horse race taking over from the used to stage a successful show. Baxter is also decidedly more vulnerable than Gable, so the outcome isn't quite as predictable. Although it would be better if less "important", the film may prove an enjoyable if leisurely good vicarious escape where the betting odds pile up. Then, suddenly, the film really comes to life and maintains a breathless pace until the end.

Capra's remake in 1950, as a Crosby musical, was remarkably faithful to the original, and worked far better than his lamentable remake of "Lady for a Day".

Some seven or eight players from the original repeated their same roles, thus enabling Capra to cut with impunity to the original material and use it from the first film. Unavailable for years, "Broadway Bill" has been seizable (?) if at allomly in abysmal dupes, our print is the best we've ever done and very acceptable, even though we had been holding off hoping for an even better one. Picture quality is good, sound excellent, and the main drawbacks are some annoying scratches in the middle section, and a retreat to softer focus in the last five minutes or so. A fine substitute for the not-yet-ready "Way of the Strong", we felt that we could live with these print shortcomings — especially since pictorial beauty was never really a trademark of either Capra or Columbia in the mid-30's.