FILM SERIES: Program #9  
December 1 1978

UNDER 18 (Warner Brothers, 1931) Directed by Archie Mayo; Screenplay by Charles Kenyon and Maude Dalton from their original story, "Skylife"; Genera, Sid Hickox; 80 mins.


Although tonight's two titles sound rather like a late 30's or early 40's 2nd Street double bill, such is not the case, and both are rather sincere, underplayed and honest little films. The only blatant dishonesty about "Under 18" is its title, since it doesn't really seem to apply to anything in the film, except possibly Marian Marsh in the film's prologue! Although there's nothing radically new about its content, it's refreshingly simple and direct, and, as in many early talkies, the dialogue has an unforced and even undramatic quality to it. This quality is underscored by some quite remarkably long takes (especially involving Marian Marsh and Regis Toomey, who do surprisingly well at memorising such long stretches of dialogue) which have such a touch of accidental quality that one often feels one is eavesdropping on a private conversation. Other elements worth noting are some exceptional street shots in the early portions of the film, where good sets, cunning art-direction trickery and a mobile camera all combine to create a very convincing atmosphere, and, in another area, the quite surprisingly strong performance from Anita Page, too often dismissed as a third-rate Harlow (and given few real opportunities), but here doing extremely well. Despite a mildly "wild" party sequence, it's a sober little film. It fails up to the extent of not coming up with a showmanlike finale, but letting the film merely finish on a fairly quiet note when the tale is told. Warren William, in his first year at Warners, has relatively little to do, but his sophistication and expertise serve well since his few scenes are played opposite Marsh and Toomey, both cast in rather naive roles, and neither having the professional acting slickness of Warren William.

--- 10 Minute Intermission ---

ARE THESE OUR CHILDREN? (Rko Radio, 1931) Written & Directed by Wesley Ruggles; Screenplay, Howard Estabrook; Camera, Leo Tover; Music, Max Steiner; 80 mins. With Eric Linden, Rochelle Hudson, Arline Judge, Ben Alexander, Beryl Mercer, Robert Quirk, William Orlando, Harry Shatam, Nell Haroldit, Roberta Gale, Mary Kormann, Billy Butts.

While in the post "Dead End" years of the late 30's, 40's and 50's, the juvenile delinquency story became commonplace, as much of a standardised commodity as the Western and the Mystery, in the very early 30's it was less frequently encountered. (Not least of the reasons being of course that delinquency itself was a less spectacular and menacing problem then). The youth-oriented films veered more to such depression-related movies as "Wild Boys of the Road", or to the "Children of Divorce" type of film. "Are These Our Children?", as a hard-hitting delinquency film, is thus somewhat of a rarity for its period, and while its basic story material is now familiar stuff, it wasn't clothe then, and the freshness still shows through - as do the unforced emotion and honest sentiment.

It may sound like limited praise to refer to it as Wesley Ruggles' best picture. Normally a rather stodgy and heavy-handed director, he was fortunate in having made a number of very profitable movies ("Cimarron" being typical) whose basic values were, however, inherent in script or cast, and any one of which could probably have been turned into a better picture by another director. But "Are These Our Children?" is better as well as being clearly a project that excited him and that he felt was important; it is an extremely personal film in the same way that William K. Howard's quite similar "Back Door to Heaven" was a personal film. Moreover, in purely filmic terms - the use of the mobile camera, careful compositions and lighting, stylised transitional montages - it is much more of a movie than most of Ruggles' other films. It is also quite possibly the first film made like that one (or used only in the 40's and the "rules" of film noir somewhat arbitrarily laid down, it does seem to "follow" all those rules even though preceding them by a decade. At times near documentary, at others with the casual realism of the Warner crime films, it is moderately paced and never strives for major excitement, yet its basic honesty always holds attention. Eric Linden's performance, especially in the closing scenes, is quite remarkably sensitive. Never before or since has he had such a chance. Throughout the film as this final one with its more than usual relationship to the climax of "An American Tragedy" (Ruggles may well have been specifically influenced by this, since Sternberg's version of the Dreiser book had been released a few months earlier). In the face of the film's many virtues (especially from the then rather uninteresting Rko studios) its flaws are minor. Already a long film, there are signs that it was longer before final editing, and that garlands are cut into crime is just too quick and inadequate motivated, and some later transitions are equally abrupt. Beryl Mercer's type-casting - and type-acting - is annoying, though probably less so in 1931 when audiences hadn't had to sit through a whole decade of her chin-veriering whimn. On the whole, an important film that should be far better known than it is.

--- William K. Everson ---