
Together with "The Rich Are Always With Us", "Frisco Jenny" was Ruth Chatterton's own favorite among her Warner pictures. It starts out like an old-fashioned melodrama very much in the tradition of the silent "Old San Francisco". However, the expected earthquake comes early in the picture, and a well-done sequence of minor spectacle it is too, with one marvellous shot of the bottom literally dropping out of a salon. There is some stock footage from the earlier "Old San Francisco", including that gratingly anachronistic modern shot of a building being demolished, but most of it is newly staged. From there on in however, it becomes apparent that we're in for another variation on "Madame X", and one as close to it as possible without becoming outright plagiarism. It's theatrical and predictable, but it moves, both in terms of its own style and in the actual plot ground it covers. It's all in the pre-earthquake sub-plot. Considering how pat the script is, it is often quite surprisingly moving, thanks mainly to one of Ruth Chatterton's best performances. James Murray is in it only briefly, and Donald Cook is again the self-righteous do-gooder and, as in "The Public Enemy", comes across as something of a prig today. The children playing Cook in various stages of growing up are all singularly obnoxious, and this does tend to work against the emotional appeal a little. One of the highlight sequences is a delightful written and played business meeting of the various Madames working for Miss Chatterton, a model of how to be explicit without being tasteless. As in "Safe in Hell" (perhaps also due for a repeat) Wellman uses some rather curious camera angles at times - the elbow of a violinist for example, used to open and close one scene - but on the whole the approach is workmanlike rather than arty, appropriately full-blooded rather than subtle. Now that far more of their total bodies of work are available for reappraisal, Wellman seems a somewhat less interesting director than Raoul Walsh, even though his best films are probably superior to Walsh's best. But neither Wellman nor "Frisco Jenny", one of the best of his Warner programmers, need any apology.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

LADY KILLER (Warner Brothers, 1935) Directed by Roy Del Ruth; screenplay by Ben Marxson and Lillie Hayward from a story by Rosalind K.Shafer; Camera, Tony Gaudio; 76 mins.


"Lady Killer", one of the most enjoyable of the early Cagney vehicles, gives the impression of either having been constructed as it went along, or hurriedly scripted on the back of a studio menu. It never decides whether it wants to be a thriller, a regeneration drama or an outright comedy. And even within these categories, it wavers between treating the first two elements straight, and lampeasing them. Accordingly, it skips along from murders to Hollywood satire and a gangster chase at a breathless pace, and if nothing else, it fulfills surprise. It is said that there have some real bite: Margaret Lindsay, playing a movie star, has an unkind line in which she refers to herself as a lucky actress of limited talent, and the directorial profession is mercilessly kidded by having Herman Bing and Luis Alberni as its representatives! Snide movie critics come in for a satisfying trouncing too. Cagney is at his most pugnacious and aggressive - perhaps too much so for the role's good, though Cagney fanciers never seem to mind these early excesses. Fairly restrained for a pre-Code movie in terms of gags and wisecracks, it finds its way with a vengeance. Cagney handles his women, the fashions are startling and provocative, and the action - be it comedic or melodramatic - keeps in brisk gear throughout.

-- William K. Everson --

Program ends:10,23  Discussion period follows.