

Two Warner Brothers Melodramas

KING OF THE UNDERWORLD (Warner Bros., 1938; released 1939) Directed by Lewis Seiler; Dialogue Director, Vincent Sherman; Screenplay by George Bricker and Vincent Sherman from a story by W.R. Burnett; Camera, Sid Hickox; Musical Direction, Leo Forbstein; 69 minutes.

With Humphrey Bogart, Kay Francis, James Stephenson, John Eldredge, Jessie Busley, Arthur Aylesworth, Raymond Brown, Harland Tucker, Ralph Remley, Charles Foy, Murray Alper, Joe Devlin, Elliot Sullivan, Alan Davis, Edwin Stanley, John Harmon, John Ridgley, Stuart Holmes, William Gould, Pierre Watkin, Clem Bevans, Carl Stockdale, Sidney Bracey, Tom Wilson, Joe Downing, Jack Mower.

Although reissued theatrically in the early 50's, "King of the Underworld" seems to have vanished since then. It was made right after "Angels With Dirty Faces", when Bogart was still alternating between leads in programmers and key supporting roles in "A" pictures. It was an extremely prolific period in his career, with another ten films due before "High Sierra" turned the tide and headed him for full stardom. However, the writing is very much on the wall here -- Bogart receives solo above-the-title star billing, while Kay Francis, one of Warners' erstwhile biggest stars, is winding up her contract and has to content herself with top supporting billing. However, she and Bogart are evenly matched, and it's a good vehicle for both of them.

The film is a cunningly expanded (in plot, not in length) remake of William Dieterle's "Dr. Socrates", which we ran several seasons back. Kay Francis has the old Paul Muni role, Bogart takes over from Barton MacLane, and James Stephenson replaces Ann Dvorak. (John Eldredge and Raymond Brown were in both versions).

There's not too much that needs saying about "King of the Underworld". It's slick, it's fast, and has all the Warner production trimmings and polish. There are some good supporting performances, amusing dialogue, and many familiar faces in bits. Bogart snarls and twitches and makes more than the most of a very one-dimensional role.

- Ten Minute Intermission -

BLUES IN THE NIGHT (Warner Brothers, 1941) Directed by Anatole Litvak; Associate Producer, Henry Blanke; Screenplay by Robert Rossen from the play "Hot Nocturne" by Edwin Gilbert; Camera, Ernest Haller; Montages by Don Siegel; 88 minutes.

With Priscilla Lane, Richard Whorf, Betty Field, Lloyd Nolan, Elia Kazan, Jack Carson, Wallace Ford, Peter Whitney, Billy Halop, Howard da Silva, Charles Wilson, George Lloyd, Matt McHugh, Joyce Compton, Herbert Heywood, John Dilson, Franklyn Farnum, Roland Drew, Anthony Warde, Charles Irwin, Emmet Vogan, Robert Homans, John Hamilton, Kay Aldridge, Wade Boteler, Jack Mower, Fred Kelsey, Brooks Benedict, Jimmy Lunceford and Will Osborne and their orchestras.

"Blues in the Night" was one of the best of a small group of rather serious movies about jazz and swing (others included "Syncopation" and "Birth of the Blues") made in the early 40's as a partial reaction against the glossy big-band Hollywood musicals of the period. At the time, it was very well reviewed, but not enthusiastically received. It got less distribution than most Warner films, and was even touted as something of an art-house picture. A lot of rather "arty" pictures of those years fooled critics and audiences into thinking they were "art", and time has been harsh to many of them. The nearly 40 years that have passed since it was made haven't transformed it into a forgotten masterpiece -- but they have made it substantially more interesting. The talents involved in its production - Litvak, Rossen, Siegel, Kazan (as an actor) - are all better known to us today, and in the case of the latter three, it's particularly fascinating to look back to this very early stage of their careers.

Too, the film is very much of a film noir - and again it's intriguing to look back and see how, even before the descriptive term had been coined or its stylistics outlined, it was already, as if by instinct, following most of the "rules" of that particular cinematic game.

In some ways it bears comparison with John Huston's "In This Our Life", at the time also considered an outstanding film, and now merely an example of stylish excesses. In other ways, it might be linked with those popular "bad" Warner films "Beyond the Forest" and "The Fountainhead". I don't want to suggest for a moment that it is a "bad" film or, worse, a "campy" film. Nor on the other hand, do I want to claim great artistic importance for it. But it is an exhilarating film, and one senses that everybody connected with it honestly thought that it was an important film, and gave it their all. It's a showcase not only for the totally studio-made film of the period, but also for bravura directing, writing, acting, photographic and editing styles.

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One gets the impression that it could easily have been a big, brash, typically commercial Warner special. It doesn't take too much effort to mentally recast it with Ann Sheridan in the Lane role, Davis or Lupino in the Betty Field role, Raft in the Whorf role, and Bogart in the Nolan role - and with Raoul Walsh directing, you'd have another "They Drive By Night". Maybe that's precisely why it was not made that way, and somebody at Warners was persuaded to give it to the newer talent and aim at art rather than commerce. Whatever the motivation, it was and still is a fascinating experiment.

It covers so much ground that it's amazing how short the film is - although it features such lightning-paced dialogue delivery and general narrative speed that it actually plays like a 60-minute "B". The pace never allows much time for establishment of milieu - it is never made quite clear just when all this is taking place. And many of the characters just jump in with their roles instantly identifiable: Betty Field, for example, merely repeats her "Of Mice and Men" role verbatim! For director Litvak, it was the ninth and last film he had made for Warners over a five-year period, and seems to confirm that even individual directors at Warners tend to become part of the system. The somewhat ponderous and pretentious style of the earlier Warner-Litvak work ("Tovarich" for example) seemed to grow less evident with each succeeding picture. With this last one, some of the pretensions remain, but the style is pure Warner Brothers.

As an actor, Kazan is still theatrical, but far less mannered than he had been the year before in "City for Conquest". As befits a film noir subject, no ray of sunshine ever intrudes, and the film remains resolutely night-bound and studio-encased. One or two of the less important sets - the New York skyline seen from New Jersey - are a little too economically artificial, but within the stylised whole, it hardly seems to matter. The stress on low-ceilinged sets suggests that "Citizen Kane", in release some six months earlier, was already beginning to have its effect on cameramen and art directors.

But undoubtedly the greatest joy for current film aficionados is the chance to see a quintet of early montages by Don Siegel. Traditionally, montages are money-saving devices designed to illustrate changes of locale or period via means of maximum economy - usually stock shots cunningly intercut with a few newly filmed closeups of faces or objects. For the first couple of montages, Siegel toes the line and does his job efficiently - and cheaply. Then, suddenly, the montages become far more important, telling whole chunks of important story material via impressionistic design and editing that cuts down a reel of plot to about a minute. As if realising the importance of these sequences, Litvak seems to have given Siegel both his head - and a liberal budget allowing for decent sets and fancy lighting. The later montages take on a manic quality, as though Siegel realises that he finally has a chance to direct whole stories in miniature. The sequence of Richard Whorf trying to teach Betty Field to sing reaches a climax of hysterical frenzy with Field running amok on a giant keyboard, and even this is topped by Whorf's later delerium sequence. Even if "Blues in the Night" wasn't so much fun on its own, speeding like a locomotive to its overwrought climax, these Siegel montages would justify the whole film. Siegel of course is still a fine director, and his current "Escape from Alcatraz" one of his best and most disciplined films -- but his wild and filmically uninhibited youth had a lot of verve and exuberance to it too!

William K. Everson

Program Ends at 10.28 and will be followed by a discussion session.

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