Debutantes at large: Two decades, two views.

Sometimes films are kept waiting in our wings for several years, waiting just the right combination to (hopefully!) make them work and supplement one another, and tonight’s two films are cases in point. Neither is exactly overwhelming either as art or as entertainment; in prior years, before we had an audience hungry to “fill up,” take chances on unknown quantities, and not even (then) having an Archive Night slot into which they could be shunted. But each is quite charming in its own way, and, more to the point, each is a kind of barometer — or filmic time capsule — of its particular period, giving a significance which was neither apparent nor intended at the time of release. And it must be admitted too, that for various reasons — mainly cost, and an overall production expertise, elements that cannot today — the films probably are more entertaining today than they were on their initial release.

**CARELESS LADY** (Fox, 1932) Directed by Kenneth MacKenna; Screenplay by Guy Bolton from the novel “Widow’s Might” by Reita Lambert; Camera, John Seitz and George Schneidermann; 74 mins.


"Careless Lady" is trivial, even foolish, but it’s done with pace and style and a good deal of brittle and sometimes near-the-knuckle pre-Code dialogue. It was not at all well received at the time, the basic complaint being that it was predictable — which it is, but in a way that makes it oddly familiar rather than just stereotyped today. One of its major delights of course is Joan Bennett, who was quite unique in her ability to combine languid appeal with convincing innocence. As once she gets past the "ugly duckling" segment of the plot, she is gowned to the hilt and photographed by two of Fox’s top cinematographers, so that even if the film had nothing else, the Bennett elegance and presence would be enough. It’s a typical comedy of manners and misunderstandings revolving around divorce and affairs, still not matters taken lightly in those days, but regarded by Hollywood as being "sophisticated" subject matter. If it doesn’t represent the reality of the day, it certainly reflects attitudes — and does the traditional settings of Paris as a background for most of the goings-on. Depression-hit Americans might well have resented the story if it were more thoroughly placed in an American milieu, but dumping it on those decadent French somehow made it quite acceptable.

Another interesting sidelight of the production is the first of many blatant rip-offs of Clark Gable, viz, in this case, Weldon Heyburn. Since this was even before "Red Dust," the imitation had to be of the early Gable — the Gable of "Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise," and thus is purely superficial, and largely a matter of rugged masculinity. Heyburn admittedly does bear a striking resemblance to Gable, when posed, angled and dressed with care. Medium and long shots, processed as stills, might well pass for Gable. But there of course the resemblance ended, and while Heyburn was a useful actor, he certainly had none of Gable’s magic. For some time he was around, and, amidst the Gable imitations, but quickly wound up as heroes in "30s and villains in westerns. Whatever charm he had was gone by the forties. Other more talented players introduced as new Gables — George Brent and Kent Taylor for example — quickly realised the futility of it all, and struck off on their own. But the game was never abandoned, and in the early 40s Don Castle (sometimes with, sometimes without mustache) was as carefully patterned on Gable as Heyburn is here.

While "Careless Lady" starts off strongly — there is some delightful dialogue from Nora Lane as she admires the Heyburn physique with carnal delight, and explains the facts of life to the naive Miss Bennett — it does tend to become fairly routine by the mid-way point. However, it is still good to look at, and contains much that still entertains. Quite incidentally, it is also very much of a lost film, and tonight’s is its first New York showing in at least 35 years, and probably a good deal longer. (It is also the second of only four films that Josephine Hull made between 1932 and 1950.)

**PUBLIC DEB NUMBER ONE** (20th Century Fox, 1940) Directed by Gregory Ratoff; Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; screenplay by Earl Tunberg and Darrell Ware from an original story by Tunberg and Don Bttinger; Camera, Ernest Palmer; Music, Alfred Newman; 80 mins.


It’s hard to believe, but the original story of "Public Deb Number One" was written in 1919 by Howard Estabrook, and it was not until 1940 that it was brought to the screen in a film version. The story concerns a young debutante who is determined to make a name for herself in society, but who is forced to work as a secretary in order to support herself. Despite her efforts, she is ultimately rejected by the society she once dreamed of joining, and is forced to rely on her own wits and resourcefulness to make a life for herself. It’s a touching story, and one that still resonates with modern audiences. The film was directed by Gregory Ratoff, who was known for his work in the silent era, and it features a cast of stars including Brenda Joyce, George Murphy, and Elsa Maxwell. Despite its age, the film still holds up well, and is a testament to the enduring power of the story it tells.
A perfect example of how minor movies can perfectly record, reflect and capture the essence of their time, this film - an enjoyable enough wacky comedy on its own - achieves some historical importance as a preserved time capsule of Hollywood's self-imposed anti-Communist crusade.

The whole ebb-and-flow of Hollywood's attitude towards Russia and Communism (which it never understood, other than knowing it disapproved of it) is a fascinating one. It started with the use of the Russian Revolution as the background to an extraordinarily prolific group of romances and melodramas from 1927 to 1933, in which leads of the nation and other key Russian figures were played by a group of fictional figures. These films segued into the hysterically anti-Communist blasts of the mid-30's, such as "Red Salute!", for their implied approval of FBI strategies now regarded as VERY dirty pool, and for their aggressively non-intellectual stance. There was a tentative thawing-out with "Hinotovka" (significantly, written and directed and largely played by Europeans) and "Comrade X", but almost immediately thereafter a switch to anti-Red by ridicule propagandist methods ("He Stayed For Breakfast" being the most typical of these, along with tonight's film), another wartime about-face to fervent pro-Russian films ("Song of Russia", "Mission to Moscow", "Days of Glory", "North Star") and then in post-war years, a reversal to a long-standing anti-stance: "I Married a Communist", "The Red Menace", "Big Jim McClain", "Red Snow", etc.

"Public Deb No.1" is from that curious and uneasy period at the beginning of the War when America was still neutral. Hollywood was cognisant of the fact that it wasn't supposed to take a political stand, and was still committed to purveying entertainment material. Although the studio was looking for the home market, yet with world affairs in their current state, there was the feeling that films should "say something" of significance. Most attempts to weld entertainment to "statements" were not too successful - there were few talents around to match Preston Sturges, so there were far more films like "Public Deb No.1" than "Sullivan's Travels". And since Hollywood still wasn't supposed to be anti-Nazi, the Communists were fair game and fashionable beards (and often the Russians didn't pose much of a threat to Hollywood income, which collected but little from the USSR anyway)! The plot at this particular time, in films like this one and Columbia's "He Stayed for Breakfast", was to expose Communism as a sham and a racket, and to show that if people of integrity were lured into it, then it was only a matter of time before they realised that they had been tricked and duped. There was never any allowing for the possibility that the Communist ranks might include men of genuine integrity and idealism, not even "misguided" ones! Brenda Joyce here is somewhat of a reincarnation of Barbara Stanwyck in the much earlier "Red Salute". The film is of course quite inconsistent within itself: at its beginning, the Oriental Legionnaires are presented as redneck caricatures, yet presumably their actions are intended to be justfied by later events in the movie.

It was not, needless to say, a marked boxoffice hit, although doubtful audiences were flattered into thinking they were getting a little political 'something'. In England, it was briefly fashionable, never particularly popular but never a subject for ridicule either, the film got a fairly wide initial release (since comedies were especially popular in those early war years) but disappeared very quickly. The British had never really understood what deburtantes were, understood Elsa Maxwell's apparently pivotal role in American society even less, and at that particular time had no real need or desire to find out. (Actually, Elsa Maxwell's name was a part of the main title, which bemused the British even more!)

Of course, one cannot - and should not - analyse a film like this too carefully on purely political grounds. But therein too, lies its danger, since its political irresponsibility could sway and inflame judgements of those who know even less about the issues at hand than the makers of the film.

However, in its own way, and despite the occasional and sometimes embarrassing pauses for speeches on Americanism, it's an amusing wacky comedy in the Capra tradition if not up to Capra standards. The cast is full of wonderful character people, some of the snappy dialogue has real punch and even bite, and there are a number of zany highlights - including Elsa Maxwell's appearance at a masquerade party as Benjamin Franklin! Restraint is never meted out, though, and the only way in which the code can figure (unfortunately) is the Production Code pout its foot now and left a basically offensive and cheap gag largely to the imagination, although the groundwork is certainly set up. With a subtler director and some more imposing star names (and Brenda Joyce never quite fulfilled her initial promise from "The Rains Came"), this could well have been a much better comedy, and one that might have avoided its now total obscurity. But then it might also have been a far less accurate rendition of the attitudes of its time and that, in the long run, may be its basic contribution to the history of the movies.

-- Wm.K.Everson --

Program ends: 10:25, followed by discussion.