An Evening of "B" movies

Since the films themselves don't need much verbal exposition, we'll devote our short introductory talk tonight to re-defining just what a "B" picture is. Basically, the Bs that we show in our programs here fall into one of three categories: films that are primarily of academic interest, those that are really good on their own merits and need no apology; and those that perhaps aren't really good, but because of similar plot content, or a shared director or star, make interesting supplements to the main film of the evening. They are often rather difficult to place, and titles often pile up; hence our periodic collection of three "Bs" in one evening, since their short running times rarely exceed the length of a normal double-bill. Please note that there will be a five minute intermission between each film.

A ROUGH ROMANCE (Fox, 1930) Directed by A.F. Erickson; Scenario by Elliot Lester from the magazine story "The Girl Who Wasn't Written" by Kenneth E. Clarke; Cinematography, Roy Webb; Assistant Director, Swing Scott; 52 mins.

With George O'Brien, Helen Chandler, Antonio Moreno, Noel Francis, Eddie Borden, Harry Cording, Roy Stewart, David Hartford, Frank Lennix, and John Wayne as an extra in the saloon scene.

In the very strictest sense of the word, "A Rough Romance" isn't a "B" picture since the phrase wasn't yet in use either by the trade or critics, but in all respects it is a technical "B," by default if not intent. It's a curious picture indeed, obviously a fairly expensive and carefully produced film, with some excellent location work, but amazingly short even allowing for the different standards of length against a backdrop that period. George O'Brien was still a name to conjure with, and used until 1931, John Ford's foremost star. One is also somewhat surprised to find prominent playwright Elliot Lester (Richard Lester's father) employed adapting someone else's work, especially when it is work presenting no particular challenge. Certainly, even in that early period of sound, the fairly straightforward story material could have been handled by any far less expensive studio writer. Quite possibly the film was intended to be far more important, and equally possibly, director A.F. Erickson may not have come up with a good enough picture, or even enough footage. Very little is known about Erickson. He had no stage or other entertainment industry background at all, trained for a business career, suddenly switched to movies, and after a period with Ince, wound up at Fox as F.W. Murnau's assistant. It was Erickson who directed the sound retake of Murnau's "City Girl" (based on a Lester play) and Fox gave him the chance to prove himself as a director which gives an interesting and sensitive performance, and in this film his talents were not exactly overwhelming, and he dropped from sight quite quickly. Swing Scott's presence on the film as an Assistant Director is quite significant: he was an excellent director of on-location (and especially Northern) material, and his "Gigolo" of 1932 is a minor masterpiece. Did he in fact "assist" Erickson, or did he perhaps salvage and re-shoot a botched film? Either way, it's an odd but enjoyable film, with a very lively action climax, Helen Chandler, as always is a pleasure to watch. Moreno doesn't seem too comfortable as the villain, but he must have found it hard adjusting to his switch in fortunes: just three years earlier he had been a leading man to Garbo, Clara Bow, Dorothy Dandridge, and Alice Terry in delusion. Eddie Borden was always one of the least recognizable of Fox comedians, but at least there's not too much of him, and we might have had El Brendel! John Wayne's bit - he is recognisable but has nothing to do except glorify from his portion of the crowd - is surprisingly minute. Even though his starring role in the same year's "The Big Trail" lay ahead, still he had had some sizeable bits in earlier films, and some good scenes with dialogue in Ford's "Salute" in 1929. The extensive location work seems to include some interior scenes as well as scenic exteriors, and the vistas of snow and pine trees make a nice contrast to the city-bound co-features.

CURTAIN CALL (RKO Radio, 1940) Directed by Frank Woodruff; Produced by Howard Benedict; Screenplay by Dalton Trumbo from a story by Howard J. Green; Cinematography, Roy Webb; Camera, Russell Metty; 60 mins.

With Barbara Reed, Alan Mowbray, Donald MacBride, Helen Vinson, John Archer, Leona Maria, Frank Faylen, Tom Kennedy, Ralph Forbes, J.M. Kerrigan, Ann Shoemaker, Tommy Kelly.

"Curtain Call" is one "B" that did receive a certain amount of recognition at the time of its release. Discerning critics did single it out, it got better than average playing time, and audiences responded well to it. It has largely been forgotten again due to the lack of exhibition outlets for "B" pictures today, and the lack of prints even if those outlets existed. One of the most recent (and best) guides to films on TV doesn't even list it, and only Don Miller's admirable paperback "B Movies" of a few years ago gave it the due. It's such a delightful little picture that to say too much about it would spoil the fun. Its basic plot - of two producers deliberately trying to bring about a flop - is a good one, and was re-used later, on a much bigger scale and to less entertaining effect, in "The Producers".
Everything about the film's chemistry is right. The co-starring and teaming of those two fine comedians Donald MacBride and Alan Mowbray was nothing short of an inspiration. Barbara Read, one of the original "Three Smart Girls", is both charming and equally perfectly cast. The script is pithy and witty, and shows what that very serious writer Dalton Trumbo could do with comedy. It's slick and well-mounted, but never overplays its hand, and tells its tale quickly and without undue complications in exactly an hour. It would be a mistake to over-rate it, but it's typical of the skills - and entertainment values - that can be found in the humble "B". (One is tempted to wonder how many films like this could have been made for the cost of "Heaven's Gate" - but it's too cruel a jest.) The success of "Runnin'" prompted RKO to make a sequel called "Footlight Fever". To its credit, it didn't try to escalate itself into something it wasn't. It remained a "B" picture too. It was entertaining and a "B" nobody had to be ashamed of, but the sparkle and originality of the first one was gone, and wisely RKO dropped any ideas they might have had of making a series.

**WE'RE ONLY HUMAN (RKO Radio 1935; released 1936)** Directed by James Flood
Produced by Edward Kaufman; Screenplay by Rian James from "Husky" by Thomas Walsh; Camera, J. Roy Hunt; 65 mins.

"We're Only Human" is a very pleasant little surprise - a nice, tight little crime film that manages to look more like a Warner Brothers film than an RKO, quite a feat in this kind of film. The compositions and camera angles, quiteflat, the pace fast, there's at least one piece of really creative and unexpected sound/picture editing, and the action sequences are played for all they are worth. Usually at RKO, dialogue substituted for action and they shied away from the more physical aspects of the gangster film in their "B" pictures. Despite the precedent of their minor classic "Bad Company" in 1931, most RKO crime films of the mid-'30s sounded exciting ("Smashing the Rackets", "Law of the Underworld", "Museum Bait") and had a virile name star to attract attention (Chester Morris, Richard Dix) but were singularly tame in the telling. But the Warner influence here makes all the difference. Screenwriter Rian James was accustomed to the Warner brand of writing, and James Flood, an interesting if uneven director, at that time used to bigger films than this, somehow combines some of the elegance of his Paramounts ("Shanghai", "Wings in the Dark") with the zip of his Warner thrillers ("The Mouthpiece"). His career never reached great heights, and his last films - "Stepchild" and "The Big Fix" - were fairly classy cheapies made for PRC in 1947. As with most good "B"s, the trick to enjoying "We're Only Human" is not so much being surprised at its quality, as bearing in mind how much less quality so many "B"s had. Since the market for these films was so cut and dried, a mediocre film would probably sell just as well as a good one. Many directors could - and did - just coast through their films, confident that as long as they came in on time and on budget, with a showable commodity, they had done their job. All the more credit then to writers, players, directors, cameramen and others who had sufficient pride in their craft not to settle for just the acceptable, but to try to do something intelligent or innovative within the fairly rigid boundaries imposed by a small budget and a short running time.

— William K. Everson —

Program finishes approx. 10:50

There will be no time for a post-screening discussion tonight, but next week's program of silent melodrama (GOING CROOKED, THE COMING OF AMOS and two shorts) will allow us substantial time for a question and answer period. The Spring schedule will be included in next week's notes; if you do not plan to be here, but would like a copy, send me a note c/o The New School. Wke.