A Tribute to Color - Program 2

Last week's session was devoted to early pioneering efforts in color, the old 2-color Technicolor system, and the transition to 3-stripe Technicolor in the early and mid-30's. Tonight's session is devoted to 3-stripe Technicolor in the mid-40's, one of its peak periods, with typical examples from both Britain and the U.S.A. It might be stressed, somewhat sadly, that tonight's films were not exactly designed as showcase examples of Technicolor, and the quite extraordinary quality that they offer was literally taken for granted then, and outstanding color quality usually note only in such films as "The Red Shoes" where the design of the film was intended to explore and exploit the use of color. There are many reasons for the decline in the quality of color today: Technicolor is available, but the basically down to two main factors: the complete switch to Eastmancolor, inferior but cheaper and easier to work with. Of course the fact that almost everything is in color today, when color films were in a relative minority (and the use of color meant more at the boxoffice) both studios and the printing labs could afford the time and effort needed to time, re-grade and correct all the prints; now with color a mass produced commodity, and the theatrical life of a film much shorter, due to its final tv destination, it is no longer possible to give color films the individual attention they need -- except in the case of a director like Hawks, whose films are infrequent and who has the clout to follow through with the labs and ensure that printing is up to his own specifications.

CANTON PASSAGE (Universal, 1946) Directed by Jacques Tourneur; Produced by Walter Wanger; Screenplay by Ernest Pascal from a story by Ernest Haycox; Camera, Edward Cronjager; Musical Director, Frank Skinner; 90 mins.

Although a critical and popular success, and quite one of the best westerns of its period, "Canton Passage" was not quite the smash boxoffice success that it might have been. Somewhat word got around that it took itself rather seriously, and that while there were bouts of quite dynamic action, it concerned itself far more with plot, characterization and the evoking of atmosphere. These are far from being criticisms since in fact they add to the film's rather unique style, but they are not altogether what audiences expected from a Western in that period. The "Gunfighter" period, Jacques Tourneur, son of the great pictorialist director Maurice Tourneur, was especially adept at supernatural thrillers ("Cat People", "Curse of the Demon") but not in Westerns, except perhaps with Joel McCrea), films that were pleasuring pictorially and dramatically satisfying ("Wichita" for example). Without tiring for marathons of action, it's rather interesting to note that here Tourneur obviously draws on his earlier associations with Val Lewton in relying on understatement and suggestion. Many key scenes occur off-screen, and the final Indian uprising is economically staged, played for menace and suspense rather than spectacular thrills. Equally interesting, when Val Lewton produced a Western at Universal in the 50's ("Apache Drums") he obviously studied this film for inspiration. There are also a few scattered hints here and there that Tourneur was at least familiar with John Ford's "Drums along the Mohawk"). The plot is unusually strong, though the attempt to transpose British Patric Roc to Hollywood stardom didn't entirely work, and the following year she was back in England fe

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--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

JASSY (Rank-Gainsborough, 1947, released in the U.S. by Universal in 1948) Dir: Bernard Knowles Produced by Sydney Box; Screenplay by Dorothy and Christopher from the novel by Norah Lofts; Camera, Geoffrey Unsworth; Music, Henry Coehl; 96 mins.

"Jassy" was one of the most elaborate of the many Gainsborough Regency and Gothic romances that began in 1943 with "The Man in Grey", but it was far from the best. Unquestionably, "Blanche Fury" and "Fanny by Gaslight" were the best of films, and "Madonna of the Seven Moons" and "Carravan" the most fun. (We've run those four, and will get to others in due time). The main problem is to match the two with two big female stars, Color, and a cycle of romantic films at peak popularity, it was a good idea of success, but seriously diluted by the tremendous potential. With a heroine who is a gypsy girl with second sight, all sorts of melodramatic characters and situations, and the inevitable literary and thematic echoes from "Gone With the Wind", it should have been played as full blown melodrama. But it treats all of its dramatic excesses with a bland casualness, and particularly needs a strong leading man to hold attention as James Mason or Stewart Granger did in earlier films, Derryl Walsh, a newcomer just wasn't up to it. Gainsborough used Lockwood and Roc almost as a Karloff-Lugosi team, alternately making one the villain and the other the good girl in such films as "Wicked Lady" and "Loves around", but Roc was so popular that the punchlines were always pulled in her case. For all its shortcomings, though, it's still fun and the color and art direction are quite stunning.

Program Ends approx. 10:55. FULL CAST LISTS ON DISPLAY AT Rear.

-- W.K. EVANS --