Spotlighting an Independent Producer: Edward Small

Independent Producers (making their own films for their own company, but releasing through one of the major distributors) were at their most prolific peak in the 30's and 40's, ranging from David O. Selznick, Sam Goldwyn and Walter Wanger at the top of the ladder down to Sam Katzman and Bernie B. Ray at the bottom (even their names indicate a kind of class boundary as frequent as that for their productions). The frequent leading Independent producers like Seymour Nebenzal and Benedict Bagesau somewhere in between, and Edward Small and Hal Roach providing a mid-way point that aimed at class within the possibilities of definite economy. Small made no masterpieces, and a few of his films were inevitably clinkers, but in a commercial sense he usually delivered, and the public never had cause to feel cheated. His modus operandi was rather interesting, and eddy enough he has always been ignored. (Wanger has been studied for his frequent forays into socially-conscious films, Roach for his contributions to comedy — and for his attempts to break away from comedy).

Tonight's two films provide an interesting cross-section of the kind of films he made, and the way he made them.

Small was formerly an actor, small-time theatrical impresario, and part-time agent, the latter a field on which he expanded in the 30's. In the late 20's he produced (though not as an independent) a dozen or so films for Warner Brothers. His career really took off in 1932 when he formed Alliance Pictures and began to release through United Artists, a company with whom he stayed for two decades, before a brief tenure with Eagle-Lion. His later years as a producer floundered somewhat: earning production costs made it difficult for him to maintain his own organisation at full production, a fate that also befell Hal Roach. Small's small films were unimportant "B's" that he was ill equipped to produce, and the disastrous "Valentine", but in between these few failures and his beginnings as an independent producer in 1932 lies a very satisfying body of work.

Small's films were always economical, but he had a way of making sure that every dollar spent showed up on the screen, so that his films always looked far more expensive than they were — especially when there was a cunning, creative and resourceful director at the helm — James Whale on "The Man in the Iron Mask" for example. He was cunning in his choice of directors too, getting men with talent and experience (obviously) but also choosing men somewhat past their primes in terms of Hollywood's own conception of their importance (Redley V. Lee, George B. Seitz, James Cruze, Allan Dwan) and thus anxious to really pitch in and show that they could still deliver; or directors on the way up (Anthony Mann for example) who likewise put in that extra effort to draw attention to their talents. The same modus operandi applied to stars — Randolph Scott, Jean Bennett, Shirley Temple, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Lewis Hayward — all of them good names, some even prestige names — but hired at a time when they weren't at their career peaks, so that their careers didn't add huge amounts to the budgets. When he adapted novels to the screen, either they were in the public domain as didn't have to be paid for (the Dumas stories for example) or they were "moderate" best-sellers like Horatio Spring's "My Son, My Son" for which Hollywood competition was not exactly fierce.

Once in a while Small would anticipate a new trend; his "Count of Monte Cristo" in 1934 and "The Man in the Iron Mask" in 1939 both set off new cycles of swashbucklers. More often though, he would capitalise on an existing trend; tonight's "Let 'Em Have It" came at the height of the second big talkie gangster cycle, "Kit Carson" followed (within a year) the new super-Western cycle sparked by "Stagecoach" and even used Monument Valley rather extensively; "Red Salute" was an out-and-out plagiarisation of "It Happened One Night", but with another topical note added, the 30's fear of Communist infiltration into colleges. Most of his films didn't take delivery, and delivered what was currently popular; "I Cover the Waterfront", a tough prison-camp melodrama, "Transatlantic Merry-go-Round", in the era of big musicals, "In Old Kentucky" during the spate of western films in the studio era, "Sonny Page" at a time when Dorothy Lamour was still doing her swarthy epic spots at Paramount, and so forth. About the only major miscalculation he made was in thinking that the creaky old stage farces like "Getting Gertie's Garter" and "Brewster's Millions" could be updated to a 40's milieu. They date today more than any of his other films, though it must be admitted that in the 40's with their pep and energy, and lively casts, they did find a market and probably made money. Except for adapting the big footage from "Last of the Mohicans" and "Kit Carson" to later, small-scale unofficial remakes, Small never opted for obvious economy measures. A platter of back projection in his movies indicates a link to the time spent on location. There is too much studio/exterior work in many of his films; on the other hand, maximum use was made of the location jaunts, and the crisp outdoor photography and action in, for example, "The Last of the Mohicans" compensates for the matched-up studio stuff. Too, that kind of work was a common practice in the 30's so Small was not alone in using it as an economic working method. Presumably the bulk of tonight's films are well illustrative of his modus operandi which the in the advantages and shortcomings of those methods. And while they may not seem like major productions today, they were so regarded at the time of their release. I well remember seeing both of these films in England some 45 years ago and they were extremely well received by both the critics and the public.

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LET 'EM HAVE IT (Edward Small-Reliance/United Artists, 1935) Directed by Sam Weed; Screenplay by Joseph Monceur March and Elmer Harris, with additional dialogue by Al Bebeborg, Camara, Powers Millard and Robert Planeck; Assistant Director, Nate Watt; 96 minutes. (Released in Europe under the title "False Faces").

continued overleaf
"Let 'Em Have It" was both one of the post-production Code procedure of "informed" gangster epics, with the emphasis shifted to the efficiency of the lawmen rather than the glamour of the criminals. As with the code, via its title, the FBI's much-publicized "Get Tough" attitude in the war on crime. (Others included "Hiss 'Em Up", "Don't Turn 'Em Loose" and "Show Them No Mercy"). It overlaps a great deal into the Warner/Capney "G Men" of the same year, with some far from coincidental repetition of incident and characters, though it is rather slower-paced, perhaps stronger on story, and with a greater emphasis on what, for 1935 at least, was almost semi-documentary material, although the "scientific" crime detection scenes seem to rely a great deal on luck and intuition. Sam Wood, then enjoying a prestige-veg at MGM (he made "A Day without Love" in the same year) was never a very inspiring director, and his best films were usually sure-fire because of stars or plot or some other element (the Marx Brothers films, "King's Row") and all of them could have been improved on by subtler direction. With a light-hearted plot and premise, Wood managed to turn "Rangers of Fortune" into one of the dullest and most leaden Westerns ever. He certainly doesn't seem to have the pace or vigor for this kind of film, and does seem to spend more time with dialogue than with action. (Although the lack of the kind of sustained action that one found in "G-Men" may have been partially a matter of budget too). However, the film is good enough in plot, incident and cast to make up for his undecisive direction and the unnecessary semi-comedy dithersings of Alice Brady, a fine actress too often in this kind of role. The opening montage plays good use of stock action footage from "Scarface" by the way. The film was copyrighted at 32 reels, and is actually printed from 12 reels of negative, but it's misleading length and in actual running time this translates into 96 minutes (or nine full reels). Our print is fully complete, and not the reissue print which was (carefully) shorn of some twenty minutes, primarily of the FBI training footage. Needless to say, like most post-Code gangster movies, the distinction between good guys and bad is quite obvious the FBI men are all fine, idealistic, upstanding young fellows, while the crooks are shirtless, mean and smarmy, pillaging the Warner set for all the steles and flanks not working that month! A fairly frequent visitor to early-day tv, when independent productions like this was a goodem to production-starved stations, "Let 'Em Have It", like its co-feature, hasn't been theatrically screened for many years.

**Ten Minute Intermission**

**THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS** (Edward Small —Reliance/United Artists, 1936) Directed by George B.Sailes
Screenplay by Philip Dunne, John Balderston, Paul Perez and Daniel Moore from the novel by James Fenimore Cooper; Camera, Robert Flannery; 92 mins.

Rather surprisingly, since it is such a famous piece of Americana in literary form, "The Last of the Mohicans" hasn't been too well (or frequently) handled by Hollywood. By far the best (and perhaps the definitive) version was the silent film made by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown in 1920, though one can have high hopes for the quality of an apparently lost German version of the same period in which Berta Frisell played not the villainous Magua but the heroic title role.

In the sound period, tonight's version is quite certainly the best, though the only competition was a preceding Mascot serial, rather cheap and talkative, and a dreadful mid-'40's remake by Sam Katzman, and a tv series. This 1936 film takes many liberties with the original Cooper story, writing in such typical Hollywoodian elements as a levee story for Hawkeye, and it even entices to have the wrong girl killed off. The "impossibility of an inter-racial love story is perhaps the most controversial element of the film, and it's one that is, on second thought, rather predictable.

As a piece of blood-and-thunder action melodrama however, it holds up well. At the time it was reviewed as being exceptionally (and almost unacceptably) blood-thirsty, and while it seems relatively tame in terms of today's blood-latching, the massacre sequence is still very powerful (though surprisingly, not as savage as in the Tourneur silent). The canoe pursuits and outdoor action scenes are well-staged by silent action specialist George B. Seitz, and the serial's finale are the later directed "Kit Carson" for Small. True, the location-action sequences are one of those films of "poor information and " Ihre stuff, and is certainly helped along by large-scale lifting of chunks of Max Steiner's "King Kong" score. The cast is quite strong, and Bruce Cabot has a field day as Magua — caught by his villainy as the No.1 hoodlum in "Let 'Em Have It". The white actors in makeup as Indians (especially William V. Mong) are far more convincing than those used by d'Alles (Victor Varconi, Paul Harvey and others) in the same year's "The Plainsman".

The Last of the Mohicans" was, rather surprisingly, one of a kind: despite the success, it inspired the usual sequel by Small, new imitations by other studios. Small himself seemed to change directions immediately thereafter, making a curious little group of pictures for RKO ("Sea Devils", "The Toast of New York", "Super Sleuth") before returning to United Artists with a rather gentler brand of film: "The Duke of West Point", "King of the Turf". Tonight's two films thus represent a kind of high point of mid-'30's Small melodrama; certainly (together with 1935's "I Cover the Waterfront") his taughest films. Both, incidentally, premiered at the Rivell Theatre in NY.

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Program ends 10.57 (No discussion period)

(Among later Small films of real interest and merit that I neglected to mention in the notes were the two Anthony Mann films "I Van" and "Raw Deal". These two films are certainly "tougher" than tonight's two, but somehow one tends to credit their style to Mann rather than Small.)