
"Romance in the Dark" presented something of a problem when it surfaced. While not a "lost" film, it just hasn't been shown in years, and since John Barrymore is starred, it has long been a major gap for Barrymore fans. However, the film turned out to be little more than an amiably foolish time-killer - one that both Barrymore and Swarthout admirers would want to see, but also one that would inevitably disappoint if expectations were raised too high. Quite fortuitously, the solution was provided by the unexpectedly sudden availability of the long witheld "It's a Date". "Romance in the Dark" complements it admirably in mood, and can be shunted back to a "B" position where, subliminally at least, it should not excite the same expectations. All told, "Romance in the Dark" is essentially an illustration of the shortcomings of the old system. The assets of that system far outweigh its liabilities, as most of the films in our series seem to confirm. But still, there was a need to keep stars and directors busy, to keep exhibitors supplied, to make a specific number of pictures a year - and once in a while a film like "Romance in the Dark" reminds us of the cannon-fodder type product that could emerge from such a system. Its plot is frail and fragile; had it been the basis for a 65-minute Universal "B" with Allan Jones and Jane Frazee, there'd have been no cause for complaints. But here, dressed up with glossy Hungarian sets and decor, a strong cast, Gladys Swarthout given more singing to do than usual in her badly mishandled Paramount career, one is constantly aware of cost and effort of inspiration to put it over. For that reason, or for Wilder could have made it sparkle. So could Chevalier. (One thing one can never accuse John Boles of is an excess of sparkle, or even a sufficiency of it!) But a post-mortem is useless. It's certainly pleasant and inoffensive fare, it's good to see all those old familiar faces from Claire Dodd to Torben Meyer, and without a strong director to help him toe the line, John Barrymore has great fun with his role and extracts more from it than was written into it. H.C. Potter was then an interesting new director of promise, a slot he filled and never escaped from for the rest of his career. From all of the foregoing it should be apparent that the trick with "Romance in the Dark" is not to expect too much, but just to sit back and see what happens, in the confident knowledge that whether it proves to be a disappointment or a delight, it is all contained in a brisk and glossy 80 minutes.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

IT'S A DATE (Universal, 1940) Directed by William Seiter; produced by Joe Pasternak; Screenplay by Norman Krasna from an original story by Jane Hall, Frederick Kohner and Ralph Block; Camera, Joseph Valentine; 105 mns.


Unseen for at least 30 years, due to Joe Pasternak's EH's remake of 1950, "Nancy Goes to Rio" (with Jane Powell, Barry Sullivan and Ann Sothern), "It's a Date" is only slightly needling of a re-evaluation and a moderating of its reputation. My own recollections of it are from its original release (in Britain) very early in 1940. British reviews of the earlier Durbin films were almost always far more enthusiastic than the American counterparts. US reviewers tended to wax extremely favorably about Durbin's screen test as a way of making her, that she was so good, and the films such ideal showcases for her, that it hardly mattered that their plots were silly and the direction of that unfortunate era. American critics, and certainly the NY Times, seemed unimpressed by the charm of the films or the skill that went into them. "It's a Date" received rave reviews in England, tho' these may have been influenced by the fact that the film came early in the war when morale was low, and it was such a perfect piece of escapism. It was considered (there) both Durbin's best and most sophisticated film to date. I would personally not agree with the latter assessment though I can understand it, since the greater sophistication of (in particular) "Mad About Music" and "First Love" was probably hidden by the deliberately underplaying of the music sequences. The withholding of "It's a Date" for thirty years has unfortunately added a little additional tinting to the rose-colored memories many of us have of the film. It must be admitted that now, seen in perspective and with the entire Durbin career available for reappraisal, it no longer seems one of her very best films; it is way up to the average standard of those first ten produced by Joe Pasternak, and that should be recommendation enough. It is #7, coming right after "First Love" (arguably her best), and obviously faced with the dilemma of developing the star into more mature roles while still maintaining the youthful exuberance that was the essence of her appeal. On the whole they have succeeded quite intelligently, and the film still pulls off that old-fashioned trick of seeming effortlessly and spontaneously, even though the plot is more mechanical and contrived than ever - so much so that some characters are allowed to remain in the dark, and never given explanations of what has happened. Nor does it matter!

If there is a major weakness, it is in the lack of really deft comedy. The whole plot is light-hearted, and the sentimental and dramatic elements restrained, but the dialogue is superbly amusing rather than witty, and there are no real comic set-pieces. So slick is the film that one doesn't even seem to be aware of this until the sudden appearance, near the end of
the film, of Eugene Pallette. Fourth in the cast, he is somehow forgotten - and his welcome appearance instantly recalls the comic delights of "First Love", and underscores the one element that is really lacking in "It's a Date".

Otherwise, it's an enjoyable and interesting landmark in the Durbin œuvre. With the depression now in the past, there's no need to apologise for the aura of wealth surrounding the Durbin character, nor create rapport with "working" people. Wealth is taken for granted, and the plot this time is not concerned with survival or happiness -- only with the degree of success that will be achieved.

Although not quite as stunning a production visually as "First Love", it's still an extremely handsome film, with elaborate sets, an art-deco shipboard background much of the time, and lush camerawork by Joseph Valentine, although the new print, prepared by MIM (which now controls the film) doesn't always do it full justice. The gloss of the original camerawork is slightly lost in this somewhat flat print, and night scenes are sometimes just a shade too dark, but these are quibbles that seem minor against the pleasure of having the film available again.

The cast repeats the standard Durbin ploy of pitting her against an urbane, reserved older male (Herbert Marshall, Franchot Tone, Charles Laughton, Melvyn Douglas in other films of the period) in order to stress her youth and vitality. "It's a Date" is probably also the best of the quartet of films that Kay Francis made for Universal at this time, and certainly the best from her point of view. Tonight is something of a Fritz Fied Festival since he turns up in both films, and perhaps the only disappointment is the under-use of Lewis Howard - so good and so funny in "First Love", and here the least utilised of all the Durbin boy-friends. He serves a functional purpose only and then is discarded, which is a pity since his role could have brought a little more depth and (reasonably realistic) drama to the story. Celia Loftus (the grandmother in the same year's "The Blue Bird") does do a nice job in adding depth to her role.

The songs as usual are well varied and run a spectacular gamut - literally from Pinky Tomlin to "Ave Maria", and that is gamut-running with a vengeance. This was William Seiter's first time at the bat as a Durbin director, and he was an excellent successor to Taureg and Koster. However, his forte was always comedy and down-to-earth drama, and rather understandably he did a much better job with the later "Nice Girl".

One final thought: when scenarists writing stories about actresses come up with "great plays" with "great roles" for their protagonists, why can't their snippets of scenes and dialogue have at least some superficial resemblance to greatness? The alleged masterpiece that Durbin and Francis compete for here looks and sounds like the turkey of all time, and it is never quite explained how a Saint and a comic Irish maid logically belong in the same plot?

--- William K. Everson ---

Program ends approx. 10:53
(There will be no time for a discussion/question session tonight; questions can be held over for next week's shorter program).

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