An evening of unsophisticated charm

PADDY THE NEXT BEST THING (Fox, 1933) Directed by Harry Lachman; Scenario by Edwin Burke from the novel by Gertrude Page; Camera, John Seitz; Music, Louis de Francisco; Art Direction, Gordon W. Hopkins; Assistant Director, Willy O'Malley; 75 mins.

With Walter Connolly, Margaret Lindsay, Harvey Stephens, Mary McVicar, J.M. Kerrigan, Fiske O'Hara, Claire McDowell, Merle Tottenham, Roger Imhof, Trevor Bland, Joseph Crehan.

Both of tonight’s films were last shown at the New School ten years ago, and to my knowledge “Paddy” has not shown up anywhere in the interim, so a revival seems much in order. Despite being a romantic follow-up (one of many) to the successful Gaynor-Baxter “Paddy Long Legs”, and having been written originally much earlier (there was a 1923 British version starring Mae Marsh) “Paddy” is in many ways a typical depression-era movie. In a way it reflects the depression in an escapist, wishful-thinking way by totally ignoring it. Yet its Cinderella story has sunshine and optimism outweighing tears, and everybody winds up happy - and rich. The complications are minor ones, even the characters who provide obstacles are likeable, and since it is set in Ireland and thus divorced from contemporary reality, its rags-to-riches story doesn’t seem like a sellout. More important today, it is a fine example of the romantic, happy and frankly “pretty” movies that Hollywood used to do so well. The score is a lovely-to-listen-to assembly of sentimental Irish airs, and pictorially, under the guidance of cameraman Seitz, art director Wiles and director Lachman (himself a former art director and painter) it is often breath-taking if unreal, with that all-but-abandoned device of the glass shot (background scenery painted on glass and placed before the camera lens in correct perspective to mesh with the live action being shot) producing some particularly pleasing effects.

— Ten Minute Intermission —

THREE SMART GIRLS (Universal, 1936; rcl: 1937) Directed by Henry Koster; produced by Charles Rogers; Assistant Producer, Joe Pasternak; Screenplay by Adele Comandini, boyfriend; camera, Joseph Valentine; 84 mins.


We have run all of the best Durbins in the ten years since we ran “3 Smart Girls” and have covered her appeal, her persona and her special place in depression-era movies in some detail in the program notes for those films, as well as placing a lengthy article on her career in the November 1976 issue of “Films in Review”. Rather than attempt to pull bits and pieces of opinions from all those notes, we’ll just reprint our original notes from March 30, 1973 — adding just two facts not included in those notes, namely that the film is a remake of a European film made earlier in which the Durbin role was not of such major importance, and that Universal actually planned the film for Judy Garland. When they found they couldn’t get her, they had to “settle” for Durbin, changed the music style from hot and strident to a sweeter, gentler level — and found they had both a huge hit and a major new star on their hands.

Although not strictly a musical (there are only three vocals) “Three Smart Girls” is nevertheless important in being the first of the highly popular Durbin vehicles that were soon to steal much of the boxoffice limelight away from the hitherto unchallenged and much more elaborate Astaire-Rogers films. For all of their elegance and musical virtuosity, the Astaire-Rogers films had an irritating kind of condescension to them, their plot lines flimsy almost to the point of arrogance, as though audiences would accept anything for the privilege of being entertained by such perfectionists. The Durbin films, in contrast, had genuine warmth and gaiety. Their plots were superficial but not really flimsy, and they were pleasing in their artifice. “Three Smart Girls” could certainly get by on its overall charm, comedy and likeable performers, devoid of music. “Swing Time” on the other hand, would be a disaster without its music. Despite a certain formula that incredibly managed to seem spontaneous and unforced, the first 10 Durbins were and are a delight. “Three Smart Girls”, though not blessed with the superior production values that Norman Baxter “Had About Music” and especially “First Love” is both typical and highly entertaining. It is also something of a monument to efficient type-casting; many of our old friends from the 30′s are there, and all doing well the things we best remember them for. The girls themselves, all looking a little older and a little sexier than they were probably supposed to, are all fresh and appealing. Barbara Read especially was a revelation. At this stage, and it’s sad that within a few years she was playing tough sis-sisters, and not playing them well. (She also looked too much like Durbin for real contrast, so was replaced by Helen Parrish in the sequel). Even the story has certain socio-historic value, being from that late 30’s “ignore the depression” period when most movie families seemed to belong to the international set, taking night-clubbing, cruises and homes in Switzerland as a matter of course.

— William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.20