Twelve 1931 Warner melodramas

CHANCES (Warner Bros-First National, 1931) Directed by Allan Dwan; screenplay by Waldemar Young from the novel by Hamilton Gibbs; Camera, Ernest Haller.75m. With: Douglas Fairbanks Jr. (Jack Ingleside); Anthony Bushell (Tom Ingleside); Hubert Hobson (Nelly Prescott); Mary Forbes (Mrs Ingleside); Holmes Herbert (Major Bradford); William Reserve (Mr. General); Barry Allen (Private Jones); Edward Morgan (Lieut. Wickam); Mae Madison (Ruth); and Tyrrell Davis, Florence Britton, Jeanne Fenwick, Jameson Thomas, Billy Bevan.

Tonight's two films were both shown in the earlier days of this film series, some nineteen years ago, and to my knowledge have not resurfaced since. "Chances", incidentally, was surprisingly disliked by our 1967 audience - mainly I suspect because it was one of our first "little" films and needed a specific shift in viewing attitudes. Today I anticipate a much better response. It's a sort of World War One "Beau Geste" (very faithfully adapted from the novel by Hamilton Gibbs), simple and romanticised, the kind of film that isn't made any more just as it is from the kind of novel that isn't written any more. The quite honest, it is basically a silent film with dialogue added - not in a technical Hurrellian way, but just adding lines. It's that sort of film and we have to accept it for what it is. It's a film which is out of step with its time, and we have to look at it for what it is.

TOMORROW'S two films were both shown in the earlier days of this film series, some nineteen years ago, and to my knowledge have not resurfaced since. "Chances", incidentally, was surprisingly disliked by our 1967 audience - mainly I suspect because it was one of our first "little" films and needed a specific shift in viewing attitudes. Today I anticipate a much better response. It's a sort of World War One "Beau Geste" (very faithfully adapted from the novel by Hamilton Gibbs), simple and romanticised, the kind of film that isn't made any more just as it is from the kind of novel that isn't written any more. The quite honest, it is basically a silent film with dialogue added - not in a technical Hurrellian way, but just adding lines. It's that sort of film and we have to accept it for what it is. It's a film which is out of step with its time, and we have to look at it for what it is.

THE STAR WITNESS (Warner Brothers, 1931) Directed by William Wellman; story and screenplay, Lucien Hubbard; Camera, James Van Trees; 60 mins. With: William Gargan (Anthony Whitlock); Charles McGraw (Grandpa Summerville); Grant Mitchell (Pa Leeds); Frances Starr (Mrs Leeds); Sally Blane (Sue Leeds); Edward Nugent (Jack Leeds); Ralph Ince (Maxie Camps); Tom Dugan (Brown); Robert Elliott (Williams); Noel Madison (Hogan); George Ernest (Neal); Dickie Moore (Denny Leeds) and Nat Pendleton, Allan Lane, Russell Hepton. NY Premiere: Winter Garden Theatre. Remade in 1939 as "The Man Who Dared" with Charlie Grapewin, Jane Bryan and Henry O'Neill.

One of five rugged melodramas that William Wellman turned out in 1931 ("The Public Enemy" being the most memorable of course), "The Star Witness" is very much a part of that curiously fascist off-shoot of the gangster cycle that adopted an "enemy of the state" philosophy and often advocated vigilante law as the only effective method of combating crime. Wellman's own "The Public Enemy" (1931), and such other films as de Hille's "This Day and Age", Garnett's "Okay Gangster", Lesnoy's "Charley over the White House", Erskine's "Beast of the City" and even Harold Lloyd's "The Cat's Paw" are all in a fascinating sub-genre that has never been effectively studied. While it is not hard to accept the ruthlessness of such methods (given the lack of such methods today, legal or otherwise) it is not so easy to accept the equating of law enforcement with super-patriotism of an almost McCarthyist vehemence, or the suggestion that lawbreakers and hoodlums are automatically Greeks or Italians! Chic Sale's heated little speeches about "dirty furriers" may well ring a few eyebrows today, not to mention huckles, but it was an attitude of the time, and we should accept that. Nakedly and unapologetically, the more so for recording it without comment as an accepted fact of life. (Through Sale however, the film does seem to endorse that attitude rather more than most films in this cycle). For the most part, the film is a typical hard-boiled Warner/Wellman melodrama that gets off to a cracking start and maintains a smart pace thereafter. Its treatment is generally superior to a script that does have a few holes in it, notably a dumb cop whose ineptitude is used to launch two major plot crises. The action is taut and edgy, one boiling scene particularly potent for 1931, and one almost sympathetic with racketseer boss Ince in the face of D.A. Buston's oft-repeated determination to see him burn in the electric chair, not so much for his crimes but as an example to other criminals! Chic Sale incorporates a lot of his then-familiar stage act into the plot - quite logically as it happens - and patriotic excesses apart, some of it, and especially the closing scenes, is quite touching. -- William K. Everson

Program ends 10.15.

DISCUSSION/QUESTIONS follow.