TALL TIMBERS (Cinesound, Australia 1937) Directed by Ken G. Hall

Screenplay and dialogue supervision by Frank Harvey, based on an original story by Frank Harvey; Camera, George DeKnat; Special effects, J. Alan Kenyon; U.S. release in 1940 by Hoffberg Productions, under the title "Timberland Terror"; 65 minutes.

With Frank Leigh (Jim Thornton); Shirley Ann Richards (Joan Burridge); Campbell Copelin (Charles Blake); Frank Harvey (Darley); Harvey Adams (Stephen Burridge); Aileen Britton (Claire Darley); Ronald Whelan (Ludwig Rich); Joe Valli (Scot); George Lloyd (Bill); Letty Graydon (Rossana); W. Lane Bayliff (Gavan); Peter Dunstan (Robbie).

If so many Australian films of the thirties have the look of Hollywood "B" movies it is because many of them were outdoor adventures, exploiting the Australian terrain, yet looking to Hollywood westerns and actioners as a model. Australian audiences loved them, mainly because they were far too infrequent, and the pleasure of seeing Australian themes, and actors, on the screen was almost enough in itself to assure local success. Because of the assured home market, they were all expanded to "A" feature running times and played top of the bill at home. In order to pad out basic action material with more dramatic weight, they were usually well supplied with sub-plots about regeneration, long-lost sons and miscellaneous betrayals and schemings. The films were sometimes released intact in England, but in the U.S. they were invariably cut down for the "B" market, especially as if they had American names at all (Victor Jory, Helen Twelvetrees and Lloyd Hughes were three that were used) they were named films. Tall Timbers is a "B" in form, but not necessarily in spirit, and that many of them work rather better at the shorter length. "Tall Timbers" manages to keep almost all of the subplots relatively intact, and with no signs of obvious editing, other than that events move rather quickly. They were economical productions out of necessity, and cheapness in a 90-minute "A" film would be more obvious and less acceptable. Regarding "Tall Timbers" thus as a "B", one tends to be more tolerant of the rather obvious miniatures employed in the climax. Basically it is like a Jack Holt Columbia ("Racing Thoroughbreds" for example) with a taming of the shrew subplot and a seduced maiden thrown in for good measure. It's simple, obvious, but quite vigorous. Noted Australian actor and playwright Frank Harvey had quite a lot to do with it, basing it on a story by one of Australia's finest cameramen Frank Hurley (who must have written it assuming he'd photograph it and lean it more towards a documentary). Ken G. Hall, who directed, was Australia's most consistently workmanlike director, roughly an equivalent of our William Beaudine. Shirley Ann Richards, here in a slightly self-conscious film debut, is quite charming, though of course her best work was done in Hollywood in the 40's.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

LA FERME DU PENDU (THE FARM OF THE HANGED MAN) (France, 1945). Directed by Jean Dreville; Andre Tranché Productions; Screenplay by Andre-Paul Antoine from a story by Gilbert Dupé. Camera: André Thomas; Music by Marcel Delannoy; Art Direction, Max Douy; produced under the title "The Farm of the 90 Days".

With Charles Vanel (Francois); Alfred Adam (Grand Louis); Guy Decomble (Benoni); Henry Genes (Jerome); Bourvil (The Singer); Lucienne Laurence (Marie); Claudine Dupuis (Mme. Menetrier); Arlette Merry (Amanda); Adrienne Alain (Jacqueline); Marthe Mellot (Marie's grandmother); Leonce Corne (Menetrier); Robert Demorget (Little Jean); Robert Moor (The notary).

This film was unreleased in the U.S., and is here being given its unofficial premiere. Accordingly it is unsubtitled, but it is a very easy film to follow once one has read the synopsis and understands the motivations. There is perhaps a certain frustration in not being able to fully appreciate the subtleties and nuances of some fine acting, but that is the only real drawback.

Far too many films made under the occupation in France were never released here, which is a pity for in many ways it represents one of French cinema's richest periods. While there were many things French film-makers could not do or say, for the first time the French industry was organised and well-financed (if for the wrong reasons, the Germans seeking a money-making and cultural figurehead for propagandist purposes). Jean Dreville, a notable if not exactly major French director, was a solid film-maker from the pre-war, wartime and postwar periods, though only about eight of his films were released here, and most of them (such as "A Cage of Nightingales" and "The Seven Deadly Sins") from his less interesting postwar years. He worked very closely and frequently with the outstanding French actor Charles Vanel (known here primarily for "The Wages of Fear"), making well over a dozen film with him including this one.

Although deserving of a much better label, the film is one of the "lust and madness on the farm" group that formed a major sub-genre of French films in the thirties and forties. It tended to disappear after the war, partly because the Italians seemed to take the genre over (in films like "Bitter Rice" and "Lure of the Silla") and made it more popular by increasing the quota of sex -
and the measurements of a whole new crop of sexy heroines. But it also disappeared because French farm-life as shown in this film and even more notably in "Farrebrique" was changing due to mechanisation and the decreasing desire to maintain and build farms as an ongoing family way of life. Changes are much slower in coming to the Italian rural scene. Whether one regards "La Ferme du Pendu" as a melodrama, or as a slice of French rural life, it's certainly a realistically done film and often, thanks to the performances, a very moving one. The photography (by Andre Thomas, who later married British star Patricia Roc) is quite exceptional in the way it blends authentic locations with studio sets. The eleven year time span of the story permits most of it to be set in the mid-30's, thus avoiding any reference to the war. However, certain rural areas of France were left relatively uninterfered with during the occupation, and in the context of this particular story and locale, avoidance of reference to the war, even in the climax, is reasonably logical. --- William K. Everson

Program ends 10.25 Discussion follows.

Note: there are some minor discrepancies in cast names in the synopsis I have referred to in the synopsis as Dennis, but an original pressbook refers to him by the rather unlikely name of Benoni. The lecherous brother Alfred is referred to in the synopsis as Alfred (possibly because I did not catch his being referred to by name in the film) whereas the original pressbook calls him as Grand Louis. Incidentally, Bourvil -- now of course a well-known comedy star -- made his debut in this film.

Synopsis: The death of their father leaves a family farm in the hands of three brothers and their sister. Following the funeral, the eldest brother Francois asks the rest of the group to keep the farm intact, an agreement which includes the condition that they not marry. At a wedding in the village shortly afterwards, Alfred, the middle brother, openly flaunts his philandering and arouses the jealous resentment on the part of a number of villagers who suspect they have been cuckolded by him. The sister meets a young soldier who makes love to her and asks her to claim share of the inheritance, leave with him and start a new life. Francois, resisting the suggestion that he sell or divide the farm, claims that as the eldest his word is law -- although legally such a statement is untrue. When he finds his sister with the soldier the next day, he became furious, kicks the man off the farm, and forbids his sister to see him again. She leaves, asking for nothing but her freedom.

The farmhouse falls into domestic disaster, and the brothers engage a servant: the attractive, primly-raised Anne-Marie. Alfred's promiscuous activities continue to lead him into near-trouble with the wives of the village, and he is also attracted by Anne-Marie. She resists his lecherous advances, and is repulsed by the advances of the youngest brother, Dennis, who is secretly falling in love with Anne-Marie himself, though he has never said anything to her. Francois is also enraged, forbidding Alfred to touch the girl again, though on the grounds that she is a good worker and should not be distracted or frightened away.

Alfred is finally trapped by the watchful villagers who catch him in the act of seduction, pursue him through the wild marsh country, and give him a beating so severe that he is partially crippled. Marie is now pregnant as a result of his assault, and he becomes obsessed with guilt. However, she falls from a ladder, and loses the baby. Dennis afterwards discovers that the "accident" was arranged by Francois. While she is recovering, her grandmother calls to see her, but is prevented from doing so by the now half-insane Alfred. Some of the villagers band together to force Anne Marie from her apparent captivity, but Alfred now completely loses his mind, assaults the visitors, and then hangs himself in front of Anne Marie.

Francois insists that Anne Marie leave, and as she does so, the gentle Dennis finally admits his feelings for her and offers his friendship. He returns to the farmhouse and denounces Francois for having driven away their sister and Anne Marie, of causing the brother to go insane, and of sacrificing everything -- family, happiness, humanity -- for the farm and the earth. Then he leaves too, leaving Francois alone.

Eleven years pass, and Francois feels his age and isolation. While his neighbors tell him of their children and grandchildren, he has only the satisfaction of his work with which to content himself. When the local lawyer calls to tell him that his sister, Amanda, has fallen on hard times and has written for monetary help, he also suggests to Francois that this might be an appropriate time to ask her to pay a visit. When she arrives with her young son -- the soldier/father has deserted them -- and Francois tries to persuade Amanda to stay with him permanently, Amanda resists, but the child is thrilled, and Francois begins to think of him as the possible inheritor of all that he has worked for. In the morning, as Francois works in the fields ploughing, he collapses. He dies in the dirt of his beloved farm even as the child rushes from the house in great joy to tell him that his mother has decided that they will stay on the farm.