A Vanished Genre: The "Woman's Picture"

While the phrase "A Woman's Picture" is today generally regarded with disfavor, at the time of its major usage, in the 30's and 40's, it was primarily a descriptive term used within the trade, to enable exhibitors to tell at a glance what kind of a film it was and to help in building variety into their programs. In the same way, Westerns were usually considered as being for children, war films for men, and so forth. Obviously any good film transcended those classifications to appeal to all. Essentially, the women's films, so-called, were star vehicles, emotional, and related to soap opera in tone. It was the gradual takeover of the soap opera format, that removed the species from the screen.

In a sense they are still made of course, but not in the purely fun or escapist sense that they used to be. Now they take on lofty "significance" and are vehicles for self-indulgent actresses or directors. It would be insulting to women to call "Terms of Endearment" a "woman's picture", but it is directly related to tonight's two ancestors, which are good examples of films cunningly designed for that afternoon matinee female audience.

NO OTHER WOMAN (RKO Radio, 1932) Directed by J. Walter Ruben; Screenplay by Wanda Tuchock and Bernard Schubert from a story by Owen Francis and a play "Just a Woman" by Eugene Walter; Camera, Edward Cronjager; Art Direction by Carroll Clark; Montage sequences by Slavko Vorkapich; 61 mins. (Originally made as a silent, "Just a Woman", First National 1925.)

With Irene Dunne (Anna); Charles Bickford (Jim Stanley); Gwili Andre (Margot); Eric Linden (Joe); Buster Miles (Bobby Stanley); Leila Bennett (Susie); Christian Rub (Eli); J. Carroll Naish (Bonelli); Hilda Vaughn (Governess); Brooks Benedict (Chauffeur); Joseph Bernard (Butler); Frederic Burton (Anderson); Theodore von Eltz (Sutherland); Edwin Stanley (Judge)

So many derogatory adjectives - feeble, strained, mediocre - were hurled at this film at the time that it can't help but rise above its reputation today! Actually, as one film of many when John Stahl, Frank Borzage and other directors of their ilk were turning out so many high-class emotional dramas, it probably did seem routine in the Spring of 1932, when it was released. Time hasn't made it a better film, but it has made it seem less machinery. The period may have a breezy mood, a lightness in style - despite a plot that covers many years, it gets over the hurdles quickly and tells its story in an hour; an excellent performance from Irene Dunne; and first-rate art direction and montages so that there's always something good to look at beyond stars and plot. The mill town milieu is very neatly sketched in via details or atmosphere glimpsed through open windows or along streets. Its plot admittedly can't be taken too seriously, although those that called it old-fashioned in 1932, primarily because it came from a play written a decade earlier, were being unfair since many contemporary plays and novels were equally contrived. Not the least of its delights is an immense performance from J. Carroll Naish as a sleazy divorce lawyer, trying to camouflage his tawdry machinations with an unconvincing patina of dignity and outrage.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

THE WHITE UNICORN (Rank, 1947) Directed by Bernard Knowles; A John Corfield production, produced by Harold Ruth; Screenplay by Robert Westerby, A.R. Ravilinson and Moie Charles from a novel by Flora Sandstrom; Music, Bretton Byrd; Camera, Richard Wyer; 97 mins. (Released in the US by Universal in 1948, retitled "Bad Sister" and shortened by seven minutes.)

With: Margaret Lockwood (Lucy); Dennis Price (Richard Glover); Joan Greenwood (Lottie Smith); Ian Hunter (Philip Templar); Guy Middleton (Fodey); Catherine Lacey (Miss Carter); Mabel Constanduros (Nurse); Paul Dupuis (Paul); Eileen Pert (Pert) (Norma); Lily Kahn (Shura); Valentine Dyall (Storton); Joan Bees (Alice Waters); Stewart Rome (Charles Madden).

I know nothing of the novel from which this film was made, but from the author's name it is reasonable to assume that either she or it are of Scandinavian origin. As a full-blooded drama of frustration and salvation, in the manner of "The Atonement of Gosta Berling", it might she or it have been powerful stuff indeed.

Muted to the needs of British genteel suffering, it doesn't come off as well, and like its co-feature is a star vehicle geared to a set market. "Jassy", made earlier the same year, was the last of her larger-than-life Regency romances that had been so popular during the war. Now her popularity was waning, though ever so slightly, and British films were dealing more and more with British as opposed to escapist. "The White Unicorn" is not set in London, but with realistic trappings; perhaps if there were a little more of the Joanie and her life story and less would have been struck. Nevertheless, it's a credible production - especially for an independent film merely released by Rank, and made at the small Netfield Studios in Walton on Thames. With its colorful plot and cast, it's an enjoyable film, and one almost totally forgotten both here and in England. The American title is virtually meaningless, probably used because Universal owned it (from a 1931 Bette Davis film) and because it sounded more commercial! Incidentally, signs of the Production Code times: both honeymoons, even the more romantic one, feature twin beds! -- Wm.K.Everson

Program ends: 10:17 (allowing possible delay by concert)