THE GREAT OUTDOORS: Out West and Down Under

ORPHAN OF THE WILDERNESS (U.S. title: "Wild Innocence") (Cinesound, Australia, 1937) Directed by Ken G. Hall; Based on the Cosmopolitan story "Wilderness Orphan" by Dorothy Cottrell; Screenplay, Edmund Seward; Camera, George Heath; 85 mins. With Wendy Munroe (Margot); Brian Abbott (Tom Henton); Ethel Baker (Mrs. Henton); Harry Abdy (Shorty McGee); Joe Valli (McMeeker); Chut, the Kangaroo.

Australian outdoor action pictures of the 30's had one basic problem. They patterned themselves after fast, robust American "B" movies - but because they were enormously popular at home and could play top of the bill, they were padded out with subplots so that they could attain 90 minute running times. Then when they got over here, they were promptly (and efficiently) whittled down to "B" movie size again. Thus we know most of the action films (and we've played "The Squatter's Daughter" and "Tall Timbers") only via these edited versions, which the someday‐for‐the‐movies ("Broken Melody", another Ken Hall film, coming up soon) uncut was 300 minutes! Of course it didn't usually hurt the action films too much, here the editing has (deliberately) softened some of it. A quite remarkable film, it's something of a combination of "Sequela" (MGM's lovely live‐action film) and Disney's "Dumbo", with a kangaroo rather than an elephant as its hero. The opening scenes, though clearly done in a studio, are superb; thereafter it becomes a more traditional circus and outdoor story, with a bang-up Western chase ending. Chut is such an engaging kangaroo that it's hard to believe in even the villain going so out of his mind. To me, the only real "problem" with the film is the rather too much softening of the original version of the film. Of course, of course - commits suicide out of despair and ill-treatment, an act made perfectly clear. Here, it is made to seem like an unhappy accident. It's both a charming and exciting film, one of Ken Hall's best, and Chut certainly has all kinds of audiences rooting for him.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

TEXAS (Columbia, 1941) Directed by George Marshall; Produced by Sam Bischoff; Story and Screenplay by Michael Blankfort, Lewis Meltzer and Horace McCoy; Cinematography by Edward Cronjager, A.M.

With William Holden (Dan Thomas); Glenn Ford (Tod Ramsey); Claire Trevor ("Mike" King); George Bancroft (Windy Miller); Edgar Buchanan (DocThorpe); Don Beddoe (Sheriff); Andrew Tombes (Tennessee); Addison Richards (Matt Lasham); Edmund McDonald (Comstock); Joseph Crenahan (Dusty King); Willard Robertson (Wilson); Pat Moriaty (Matthews); Edmund Cobb (Blair); Raymond Hatton (Judge); William Gould (cattle buyer); Ed Piel (Jim); James Flavin (referee); Ralph Peters (Deputy); Hank Bell (Hank); Stanley Brown, Ethan Leidlaw, Carleton Young, Richard Fiske, Jack Ingram, Art Mox (henchmen); Bud Osborne (cattleman).

When "Texas" was released in late 1941, the big Western boom - Hollywood's longest-lasting - that had begun in 1939 with "Man of Conquest", "Stagecoach" and "Jesse James" was still going strong. While some of them like "Dodge City" were by no means bad, but few of them were played straight and seriously. But in 1940 Columbia had made "Arizona Chief", an Indian Western with an important Western epic, but also one of the dullest. Having no wish to repeat the same mistake, director George Marshall (who had also made "Destry Rides Again" as well as Laurel & Hardy films) played "Texas" very largely for laughs. The action is fast and furious, but always punctuated by slapstick; so lighthearted is the opening that it's a full 40 minutes before the basic plot even begins to emerge, while the villains are neatly played for comedy too without in any way lessening their menace. Despite Allan Dwan's similar "Trail of the Vigilantes", Western film 1941 did not take kindly to seeing the genre kidded, and while "Texas" was a success, its irreverence caused it to be gobbled up in the shuffle at the time, nor is it remembered as a film of real stature despite its stars. It was newcomer Holden's seventh big film in a row over only a two year stretch, and Trevor's 5th big Western in a row (three with Wayne and one with Gable). Glenn Ford's career was coming along more slowly, via supports in As and leads in Bs, and his career didn't really take off until "Gilda" some five years later. Actually he and Holden worked better as a team in 1949's "The Man from Colorado" where the roles were profitably reversed, Glenn Ford playing the villain, "Texas" is very cunning in suggesting that it's an epic when it really isn't. It fills its 90 minutes with movement and noise, lots of extras, horses and cattle, and a train at the beginning, all of which neatly conceals the fact that there aren't any really big, expensive action scenes, though the cattle stampede climax is very lively. The foreword, the musical score, the bit players are all out of Columbia's B westerns, and they photograph one end of their Western studio street for Texas, and the other end for Abilene Kansas! It's probably this lack of pretension, coupled with its bustling pace (and its ability to keep even its killings bloodless that keeps "Texas" such an entertaining Western even if not a very important one. (None of it was shot in Texas incidentally, all of the locations being within easy reach of the studio)"

--- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.25, Discussion session follows.

Note: it is recommended that you allow time to read next week's program notes before the show, one film being unsubtitled, though easy to follow. 

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