Demille and the Blue Laws

(The New School Film Series 57: Program #1)
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Cecil B. DeMille was a former actor (and a good one) and loved to return before the camera both in short films somewhat unsubtly plugging his new product, and, from the 1940's on, in cameos roles in Paramount features. He was usually the wise master director, sometimes the paternal director not too far removed from the Lowly World back to the hero as intrepid crusader. In this delightful footnote to film history, he dictates a letter to an Eastern states bishop, applauding him for his stand for the Sunday opening of cinemas, implying that since every American goes to church on Sunday morning, he should have a perfect right to go to the movies in the afternoon -- preferably of course to a DeMille movie, which he plugs quite shamelessly.

The Go Getter (Warner Brothers, 1937) A Cosmopolitan Production directed by Busby Berkeley; Produced by Hal B. Wallis, Assoc. Producer Sam Bischoff; Dialogue Director, Irving Rapper; Screenplay by Delmer Daves from an original story by Peter B. Kyne; Camera, Arthur Edeson; 90 mins.

With: George Brent (Bill Peck); Anita Louise (Margaret); Charles Winninger (Cappy Ricks); John Eldredge (Skinner); Henry O'Neill (Commander Risdale); W. L. Blendon (Matt Flowers); Mary Reilly (Mona); Mary McShane; Burton (Sly); Herbert Rawlinson (Lester Brent); Gordon Oliver (Mr. Luce); James Robbins (Information Clerk); Joseph Crehan (Stone); Edward Gargan (Policeman); Helen Lowell (Luce's mother); Harry Beresford (Mr. Barker); Helen Valkis (Skinner's secretary); Minerva Urecal (Ricks's secretary); Craig Reynolds, Walter Miller, Carlyle Moore, Kenneth Harlan (Macon survivors); Lane Chandler (Radio officer); Ann Doran (Maze); Charles Coleman (butler); John Shelton (Radio operator); Ward Bond, Pat Fleherty (loggers); Emmet Vogan (Cashier); Louise Stanley, Peter Lorre, Spencer Tracy (Radio operators); and Pierre Watkin, George Macready, Max Hoffman, Elissa Landi, David Newell, Regis Toomey, Myrtle Stedman, Eddie Chandler, George Hanover, Mathilda Comont, Alan Bridge, Sam and Etta McDaniel, Leander de Cordova.

Peter B. Kyne's creation, the peppy ship-owner Cappy Ricks, has, like Judge Priest, Jimmy Valentine and many others, become a forgotten figure in the parade of likeable and colorful characters in popular American fiction of the teens, twenties and thirties. Nobody writes their kind of stories any more, and few people read them. But in his day, Cappy Ricks stories were extremely popular, and in the silent period the basis of major movies. The 1921 "Cappy Ricks" (for Paramount) appears to be lost, which is a pity as it sounds like one of the best. There were several sound cuttings, Republic coming out with "The Affairs of Cappy Ricks" just a month after the release of "The Go Getter" film, had an ad in the summertime in 1922, likewise a Cosmopolitan Production though for paramount release, with T. Roy Barnes, Seena Owen and William Norris (as Ricks) in the leads. This 1937 remake is remarkably close to the original - updating its World War One veteran hero to a survivor of the Macon disaster - but otherwise staying close to the continuity of the first film and the Kyne stories. (Usually Kyne's name was used, like Curwood's, as a come-on to be attached to any routine action story that matched his style, but in the case of the Cappy Ricks films, a real attempt has been made to stick to his creation).

One of the remarkable achievements of "The Go Getter" is that it seems forever about to become an exotic adventure, set in the Far North or the Far East, and never actually does so. It remains a well-written, well-paced comedy romance set in San Francisco, but one never feels frustrated at the anticipated adventures never materializing. This is partly due to the off-beat and unpredictable nature of the story, and in equal part due to the ensemble playing of a grand old Warner cast -- though Winninger (and the situations written for him) do slightly over-do the irascible character of Ricks, and almost lose him audience sympathy on a couple of occasions. Anita Louise has never looked more stunning, and is lovingly photographed by Arthur Edeson. Director Busby Berkeley, best known of course for his staging of the spectacular musical highlights at Warners and for Goldwyn, had directed a batch of non-musical features at Warners before Ricks, and this was certainly his biggest and most important straight directorial assignment to date, and he comes through beautifully. With the decline of his kind of musical spectacle, he would direct many more dramatic films, with an especial affinity for the tough thriller, ranging from "They Made Me a Criminal" to "Dry Vengeance," although he didn't get credit on the latter.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

Movie Crazy (Harold Lloyd Corporation-Paramount, 1932) Directed by Clyde Bruckman, Asst. Director, Gaylord Loyd; Screenplay by Vincent Lawrence and Clyde Bruckman, from a story by Agnes Christine Johnson, John Grey and Felix Adler; Camera, Walter Lundin; 80 mins.

(Cont. overleaf)
"Movie Crazy"

With: Harold Lloyd (Harold Hall); Constance Cummings (Mary Sears); Kenneth Thompson (Vance); Sydney Jarvis (The Director); Eddie Fetherstone (Bill, Assistant Director); Robert McWade (Wesley Kitterman); Spencer Charters (O'Brien); Louise Closser Hale (Mrs Kitterman); Harold Goodwin (Miller); DeWitt Jennings (Mr. Hall); Lucy Beaumont (Mrs Hall); Arthur Housman (a drunk); Mary Doran (Margie); Noah Young (traffic cop); Constantin romanoff (Duval); and Grady Sutton, Fred Kohler jr., Jack Perrin, Dick Rush, Sam McDaniel, Edward Piel, Blackie Whiteford, George Baker.

Perhaps initially we should point to the performance of Robert McWade as the studio head (who appears primarily in the closing reels) and comment that he was another of the screen's Cappy Ricks, playing the role in "Cappy Ricks Returns" in 1935.

While "Movie Crazy" was certainly the best of Lloyd's three talkies to date, received excellent reviews and was financially successful, it didn't consolidate Lloyd's position in the sound film as it should have done. For one thing, there had been a two-year hiatus since his last film, and he'd lost a lot of the audience support and momentum that he had gained with his first two talkies. Secondly, with so much time in between, Lloyd was not prone to learn from and correct the mistakes in those films, and repeats many of them here. In many ways it is a disappointing film, but it is always wise to make such a generalisation about any Lloyd based on seeing it without an audience. What seems mechanical and obvious in isolation, often comes magnificently to life before an audience.

Its plus factors include a typically lively opening, with one misleading sight gag followed by one of great charm. Casting Harold as a movie-struck youth seeking stardom allows for the exploitation of a Hollywood background, much in vogue then, and also permits Harold - logically - to pursue success in a way that would not be grating to a depression-era audience. In fact, the Hollywood locale provides a kind of barometer against the "real" world's reference to depression ever creeps in. Some of Lloyd's best routines (from "The Freshman" and "The Kid Brother" in particular) are dusted off, redesigned, and presented with fresh trappings. Too, the film (in its American version) is quite short, and the development is brisk. Negative factors include production techniques that had not marked advanced since his last movie - it is a relatively primitive movie by 1932 standards, and is sadly in need of a musical score to highlight and punctuate its comedy scenes. Too, Lloyd never seems quite sure of what he's after in the unnecessarily complex relationship with the heroine, and if it weren't for the personal charm and grace of Constance Cummings, many would come over as being uncaring and slightly sadistic, and certainly not worth all the trouble Harold goes to to win her. Incidentally, Lloyd has claimed that he virtually directed the film himself, since Bruckman was becoming increasingly unreliable.

However, it certainly has enough action and prolonged gags to make it a very funny film, even though a long way below the standard of his best talkie, "The Milky Way" -- the only one of his films of the 30's to have a really strong director (Leo McCarey).

This print, by the way, appears to have been one from the early 50's when, at the tail end of a theatrical reissue, it hit television briefly. There are one or two minor trims, designed to reduce the running time by a couple of minutes. The only one that is really noticeable and important is at the beginning, when in his excitement at potential Hollywood success, Harold forgets to set the brakes on his car. We see it beginning to move away, but missing is its crash important in that it visually predicts Harold's own initial collapse. Due to "non-depression" there are other rather obvious and seemingly unnecessary dissolves within scenes once or twice (as when Harold and his girl are walking in one room, and then dissolve to them sitting down in another) but these represent original editing devices. The film was made to run at approx. 100 minutes, and that length was retained for the European release, but Lloyd wisely edited some 20 minutes out for the U.S. release and those dissolves must come from that particular operation.

Program Ends approx. 10.45., followed by brief discussion period.

The Go-Getter": some additional names of small-part players inadvertently omitted from our cast list: Stuart Holmes, Tom Ricketts, Virginia Sale, John Harron, Frank Faylen, Ralph Lewis, Zelda Bennett, Milt Kibbe, Guy Usher, Harry Hollingsworth, Pat O'Malley, Jack Mower, Herbert Heywood, Desmond Clark.

PLEASE NOTE: Because of one out-of-town commitment on a Friday every Fall, I will be away next weekend - a fortuitous choice, since the program needs minimal supervision and post-show discussion is not that important. Be advised however that the program will start at 7.30 without introduction.