THE NEW SCHOOL  
FILM SERIES 60: Program #1  
September 30, 1966

BROADMINDED (First National, 1931) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy; original story and screenplay by Erle Haymes; music by Harry Ruby; camera, Sid Hickox; art direction, Anton Grot; NY premiere, Warner Strand and Brooklyn Strand; 70 mins.

With: Joe E. Brown (Oscar Simpson); Oma Morris (Constance Palmer); William Cellier Jr. (Jack Hackett); Bela Lugosi (Pancho); Thelma Todd (Gertrude Gardner); Marjorie White (Penelope Packer); Holmes Herbert (John Hackett); Margaret Livingston (Mabel Robinson); Grayce Hampton (Aunt Polly); George Gradow (Casper); and Edward Earle, Larry Steers.

It's almost forgotten today that Joe E. Brown was once, and consistently, one of the best money-makers in the U.S., according to annual polls taken by American exhibitors. Since The Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields never made it to these polls, statistics would seem to prove that he was once America's favorite comedian, although of course those polls were based largely on boxoffice revenue, and Brown made more pictures than the Marx Brothers or Fields. Many of his films do not stand the test of time too well, but his personality does survive quite nicely.

"Broad Minded" (often offered and advertised as one word), a pun title that is slightly subtler than most of the puns in the film, was one of seven extremely varied films that Mervyn LeRoy directed in 1931, the best of them being the classic "Five Star Final" which immediately followed his Brown comedy. Although not an important nor even an always recognizable LeRoy, there are nevertheless traces of the pictorial style of his heavier films, for example the low-angle interior shots, often taken from below table or chair level, which though visually interesting sometimes tend to dampen the spirit of fun. On the other hand, Brown's interest in the musical comedy form, which was unusual in 1931 films, stands out as an area Brown's screenwriting days with Colleen Moore, and suggest that such moments may have come from here rather than from the official scenarios.

Unusual in style, "Broad Minced" is also a rather unusual Joe E. Brown. There is little of his usual slapstick, and one can easily envision the role being played by anyone from Regional Benny to Pat O'Brien, or played down in favor of the other male lead. For the most part, the film is a kind of less sexy, more comic "Coconuts", complete with a resort hotel setting and a stuffy Margaret Dumont type aunt. The livelier portions of the film are in the first half, especially a wild "baby party" in the opening. Once arrived at the hotel, it settles down into standard musical comedy farce, crying out for the songs that never come, but may in fact have been written. (Many musical comedies were destined to have songs in 1931 when the first over-sized musical cycle had run its course).

Today, apart from the novelty of seeing a little-known LeRoy, the fascinating cast takes up the slack left by the sometimes missfire comedy. Margaret Livingston is every bit as bitchy (if not as bewitching) as she was in "Sunrise", and Thelma Todd, in slit skirt and negligee, forms a most unorthodox conscious romance with Bela Lugosi! Lugosi has the same kind of comic-feel-Williams that he later had in "International House", and while he probably didn't fully understand that he was playing farce rather than sophisticated comedy, he overdoes everything in a rather endearing way. It's a little hard to reconcile his European accent with the Americanized English spoken by the American named Panchito, but that's all part of the fun of typical Lugosi limelight (typical Lugosi limelight, that is) after Brown has bumped into Lugosi's auto: "First you ruin my strawberry shortcake, and now you damage my rear end!"

"Broad Minced" has so many friendly faces (and a rather chilling concentration on players who eventually cast as the pleasure principle has cast aside) that one wonders at least the courage of its convictions (like an old vaudeville performer, it keeps going at full steam even though aware that a gag must have fallen flat, on the theory that if it can keep ahead of the audience long enough, a good gag is bound to pay off.) that it doesn't really matter that it's just a time-killer. Jaded though we are these days with so much apparently lost material, a good gag is bound to pay off that it doesn't really matter that it's just a time-killer. Jaded though we are these days, it's still an event to be able to cross off another Lugosi and another LeRoy and maybe, in certain quarters, even another Brown.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

THE GREEN LIGHT (Warner Brothers, 1937) Directed by Frank Beards; Produced by Hal B. Wallis; Associate Producer, Harry Blanks; Screenplay by Milton Krims from the novel by Lloyd C. Douglas; Music, Max Steiner; Camera, Byron Haskin; 85 mins; NY premiere, Warner Strand; Cosmopolitan Production.

With: Errol Flynn (Dr. Newell Paige); Anna Lise (Phyllis Dexter); Margaret Lindsay (Frances Oglivie); Sir Cedric Hardwicke (Emmanuel Harcourt); Walter Abel (John Stafford); Henry O'Neill (Dr. Endicott); Spring Byington (Mrs. Dexter); Erich O'Brien-Moore (Frank Alien); Henry Kolker (Dr. Lane); Pierre Watkin (Dr. Potts); Russell Simpson (Ski Am); Orville Edmundson (Nurse); Wade Boteler (policeman); J. Anthony Hughes (detective); Jimmie Thomas (clerk). Like Joe E. Brown (though on a rather different level) writer Lloyd C. Douglas has become a somewhat forgotten figure. In the '30's he was an extremely popular novelist, with the happy knack of mixing romantic fiction with elements of religious and spiritual uplift, suggesting that happiness was within everyone's reach — obviously a successful formula in the depression years. His writing was slick but somewhat superficial, though giving the impression of being much
more profound. He rarely spelled out his messages of wisdom, hinting that these could be found in the Bible. If nothing else, this caused his readers to rush back to long unopened Bibles, and in the long run it probably did them no harm even though the magic messages were seldom discovered. In a very loose sense, Douglas' books paralleled A.J. Cronin's in England. Both stressed medical backgrounds, but where Douglas turned to religion, Cronin turned to social protest. Douglas' novels tend to date rather badly today, but Cronin's, while they may not be read as avidly as hitherto, do survive quite well. For one thing they are more rooted in reality, and less subject to changing tastes in readership.

Of Douglas' 11 novels, Hollywood filmed six, one of them ("Magnificent Obsession") twice. On the whole they didn't provide very suitable screen material; anxious not to offend individual religious groups (though the novels tended to be "freewheelers" in that way too) Hollywood tended to water down the spiritual content, and to "beef up" the plots in other ways. "Disputed Passage" for example, also directed by Borsage, jettisoned the straightforward original ending of Douglas' novel, and played for action-spectacle by dumping it into the war in the Far East. By far the best of the Douglas adaptations was 1958's "White Banners", possibly because it had a more down-to-earth plot, genuine emotion, and no religious tangent. It's a pity that Borsage wasn't handed that assignment, as good as it was, his unique talents would have made it even better. The last two Douglas novels - "The Rebe" and "The Big Fisherman" - were frankly written with Hollywood blockbusters in mind, as straight religious spectacles, and that's the way they turned out - with Borsage brought in again for "The Big Fisherman".

But not as good as "White Banners", "The Green Light" is probably the closest in spirit to the original of all the 30's Douglas adaptations. Again, it minimizes philosophic discussion, but at least doesn't seem the need to add comedy or melodrama. It is even more nevastrellian than the novel, perhaps because it was, several films being used to wear Flynn away from type-casting in swashbucklers, and clearly Warners didn't want to jeopardize their most important new property by putting him into "difficult" material.

The film came at a commercial high point in Borsage's career, when he was turning out big, carefully-crafted films one after the other. ... In this two-year period he was also to make such films as "Desire", "History Is Made At Night" and "The Big City". Perhaps the major problem with Borsage on a film like this was that his most unique talent was his often explainable way of eliciting major emotions from small, common-place situations. In a film like "The Green Light", where the story situations and characters are all dramatically "BIG" from the word go, there's nothing left for him to do but exercise taste and control .... which is why the "White Banners" property would have been so ideal for him. Nevertheless, the film did get remarkably good reviews, and was considered a courageous undertaking by Warners' part. If it no longer exercises quite the same emotional appeal, it still impresses with its craftsman ship, its skill, its cast and the way it manages to "harass" religion without making it seem like a sermon. The last NY screening of "Broad Minded" was some 26 years ago; "The Green Light" may have had the odd exposure since then, but it is still met a readily-available film, and deserves its chance to get up there on the big screen again.

-- William E. Eversen

Program ends approx. 10.25. Discussion period follows.