Planes, cars and ships: A Program of Silent Action Melodrama

Piano accompaniment arranged & played by STUART ODERMAN

THE SKY RANGER (L.W. Hammons-Educational Pictures, 1926) Directed by Harry Joe Brown; Produced by Charles Rogers; Asst. Producer, Bruce Mitchell; Camera, Frank Good; based on the Russell Farrell Aviator stories written by Thomas Burtis; 20 mins. With Reed Howe (Russ Farrell); Tom Santschi (Blakey Williams); Roy Stewart (Captain Kennard); Henry Barrows (Feldmore); Marjorie Daw (Mary Feldmore); Bobby Dunn (Obis); Buck Black (Buck Feldmore)

Surprisingly polished for an independent two-reel action series (and why Educational Pictures called themselves that after they made mainly comedies and actioners has always been a mystery), "The Sky Ranger" keeps most of its action out-of-doors, and is on the move from the word go. It opens up with that reliable old barnstorming stunt of wing-walking and plane transfer to replace a missing wheel (the closeups are obviously but well faked, the medium and long shots equally obviously the real thing) and then gets into that equally familiar situation of the smuggling of aliens over the border. This kind of fare, along with a western, would pack them in on Saturday afternoons in the small town - and there is a lot of talent involved for an independent film. Charles Rogers and Harry Joe Brown were late of the excellent Ken Maynard series at First National. Rogers would go on to become a tasteful producer at Universal in the 30's, with the early Deanna Durbin films to his credit, while Brown would wind up in partnership with Randolph Scott, making well above average minor "A" westerns. The camerawork is by Frank Good, who was one of the best cinematographers in the business, and did some stunning work in independent features of the 30's. Reed Howe, the original Arrow-Collar ad man, was of course a popular leading man in minor 20's and 30's films, and later became a useful character actor. The rather bland Roy Stewart never regained the stardom he enjoyed in the pre-C Foster period, but still, his name added something to a cast list ... and Marjorie Daw had been one of Fairbanks' leading ladies. Ace villain Tom Santschi of the original "The Spoilers" of course needs no introduction. A program-filler, no more, no less, but a slickly produced little short that still entertains.

CODE OF THE SEA (Paramount, 1924) Directed by Victor Fleming; scenario by Bertram Millhauser from a story by Byron Morgan; Camera, Charles Edgar Schoenbaum; 60 mins. With: Rod la Rocque (Bruce Mc Dow); Jacqueline Logan (Jenny Hayden); George Fawcett (Captain Hayden); Maurice (Lefty) Flynn (Swart Redcliffe); Luke Cosgrave (Captain Jonas); Lilian Leighton (Mrs Mc Dow); Sam Appel (John Swayne); George Lewis (extra at party) and Tom London.

This one of course we never get to see again. It's one of those short, quickies that Paramount put out in 1924, distributed through their First National branch. It's a nautical series, with "Rod la Rocque" in the lead, and "The Code of the Sea" is the first in the series, with "The Fighting Vagabond" coming a year later. "The Code of the Sea" is a bit of a routine melodrama, with lots of action and a few romance scenes, but nothing really new or exciting. The cinematography is good, and the acting is competent, but it's not exactly a memorable film.

When Paramount started making films in the early 20's, they had a lot of talent on their payroll, including stars like Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. They also had a lot of money to spend, and they were determined to make films that would attract attention. The "Code of the Sea" was part of their attempt to do just that.

One thing that separates "The Code of the Sea" from many of the other films that Paramount made in those early days is its use of location shooting. The film was shot on location at the Santa Monica Pier, and the ocean and the pier are a dominant part of the film.

The film is also notable for its use of music. The film features a song written by the famous songwriters Hoagie Carmichael and Ted Koehler, "The Code of the Sea." The song is sung by the character played by Rod la Rocque.

In conclusion, "The Code of the Sea" is a typical early 20's film that features a lot of action and a bit of romance. It's not a particularly memorable film, but it's a good example of the type of films that Paramount was making in those early days.
LUCKY DEVIL (Paramount, 1925) Directed by Frank Tuttle; scenario by Townsend Martin from a story by Byron Morgan; Camera, Alvin Wyckoff; Race climax directed (without credit) by Gregory LaCava; 60 mins.
With: Richard Dix (Randy Farmer); Esther Ralston (Doris McDee); Edna May Oliver (Mrs. McDee); Tom Findley (Franklyne sr.); Anthony Jowitt (Rudolph Franklyne); Joseph Burke (The Professor); Mary Fay (Mrs. Hunt); "Gunboat" Smith (Sailor Sheldon); Charles Selton (Sheriff); Charles Hammond (Tobias); Charles McDonald (Tom Barrity); George Webb (Frenchy); Eddie James ("Dutch" Oldham); Jack LaRue (extra in boxing sequence).

To a large extent "Lucky Devils" must accept some of the criticisms levelled against "Code of the Sea". Richard Dix was a big star, and worthy of top-flight material. Wallace Reid had been his counterpart earlier, and he too and been developed and then exploited, often in motor-racing stories like this one. For 1925, some of the economy is inexcusable — especially the primitive cyclorama backdrops in the climactic race. Since its story is of a cross-country pursuit a la "It Happened One Night", more care should have been taken to secure varying locations and backgrounds, yet it all too clearly never leaves New Jersey and some of the exteriors are quite drab. Interior sets too (though this would be less obvious today) are overly-familiar, the rooming house set being used time and time again in Paramount's East Coast productions with hardly a change of prop or decor. The film took about a month to film (mid April to mid May, 1925) and while it shows no signs of indecent haste, it doesn't show signs of extra care either. Nor is the cast, the three leads apart, particularly interesting. Money was clearly saved there.

However, despite all these carping criticisms, it plays very pleasantly and is a most enjoyable film. If it doesn't have the pep and zip that Douglas Fairbanks would have given it, it's still a lot better than similar later films like "Rubber Tires". Dix as always is relaxed and pleasant, and Esther Ralston has never looked more beautiful. Edna May Oliver, minus her voice, still manages to be herself, and very amusing too.

The "nich" stereotypes sometimes seem too overdone, and the climactic race, like the film itself never seems to know for sure whether it should be playing it straight or for comedy. It certainly has everything thrown into it, and Paramount were so pleased with La Cava's direction of it that they rewarded him with the directing assignment on the next Dix-Ralston film, "Womanhandled".

Although Gloria Swanson never had a good word for director Tuttle, both Ralston and Louise Brooks had the greatest respect for him and enjoyed working with him. It's interesting that the original stories of both of tonight's films were by Byron Morgan. Townsend Martin the scripter of the film was one of Frank Tuttle's original Film Guild unit, and appeared as an actor for Tuttle in "Second Fiddle", which we ran here some years back. One of the rural locations was repeated from "Second Fiddle" of three years earlier. Another repeat: the breezy opening is a cheerful plagiarism from the opening of Fairbanks' 1917 "Wild and Woolly".

It is the East Coast locations perhaps that give the film its greatest interest today. Most of it was shot in and around Lakewood, New Jersey. The sequence wherein Ralston visits her uncle was shot on the grounds of the Georgian Court College in Lakewood. All of the street scenes in Lakewood have a lazy, sunny rural charm, a quality that has probably vanished from Lakewood today. And if the country scenes are a bit on the drab side scenically, they are also reminders of the days when New Jersey was far more open and rural than it is today, and an extremely useful location area for East Coast productions.

If you are frustrated in some subliminal way, it is probably because most of the people in the story are singularly and unnecessarily unpleasant. Dix and Ralston are so easy-going and likeable that one longs to see some of their adversaries get their comeuppance, and too few of them do!

Assuredly Stuart Oderman's music will keep these two Paramount programmers lively, and I look forward to hearing afterwards that you were delighted with the films and felt that I had dealt too harshly with them! An audience always makes the difference, especially with marginal and borderline films. Again, it's a fine toned original print.

William K. Everson
Program ends approx. 10.10.
Discussion/questions follow.