THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 701 Program #7
April 3, 1932

TWO 1938 ACTION MELODRAMAS

Last week we presented two British thrillers, an "A" and a "B", from the same year, 1932. This week we're repeating the process with two Hollywood films, both released in the year 1938.

CALIFORNIA STRAIGHT AHEAD (Universal, 1938) Directed by Arthur Lubin; Produced by Trem Carr; Associate Producer, Paul Malvern; Screenplay by Scott Darling from an original story by Herman Baker; Camera, Harry Neumann; Musical Director, Charles Previn; 67 mins.
With: John Wayne (Biff Smith); Louise Latimer (Mary Porter); Robert McWade (Carrigan); Tully Marshall (Harrison); Theodore von Eltz (James Gifford); Emerson Treacy (Charlie Portner); LeRoy Mason (Paula); Harry Allen ("Fish" McGeeke); Grace Goodall (Mrs Porter); Claf Hynnen (Ruggins); Monty Vandegrift (Glancy); Lerin Baker (Secretary); Edward Earns (Clark)

Between a steadily improving series of "F" westerns at Republic, ending in 1936, and a bigger Republic series starting in 1938, John Wayne made this curious series of "F" action films at Universal over 1936/37. There were six of them, mainly original screenplays (a remake of the Jack London "The Abyssal Brute" was an exception) covering various aspects of sports and adventure, all running in the 50-60 minute range, and well produced by Trem Carr, who had made some of the earlier Westerns at Paramount. While they were loosely termed "action" pictures, they weren't especially generous in that department. On the other hand, Universal could play in cheaper pictures and "F"s - Deanna Durbin was their only major star at that particular time - were equipped to give them excellent production values, and they were certainly slick little films, and good audience pleasers. However, it became apparent that Wayne really belonged in Westerns, and it's rather surprising that Universal, not too happy with Bob Baker as their regular, let John Wayne go over to the "B" boys. There are indications that a second set of six action films were planned, "The Day of the Ring" has all the indications of being one of them, especially with a plot that went out to put John Wayne back on the peg field as often as possible. (William Hall played what would have been the Wayne role) anyway, the six that were made were all entertaining, only one or two of them showing their budgetary limitations. Ostenstibly they all cost about $60,000 apiece. "California Straight Ahead" (by no means a remake of the Reginald Denny silent of the same title) is to my mind the best of the group; Wayne has a made-to-measure role, and the plot is a good one. It's a pity that the cross-country race between a convoy of trucks and a locomotive, with some excellent location work and fine handling of the train bear, couldn't have been started a little earlier. There's enough potential there for it to have provided the last half of the film instead of the last quarter. Still, it makes for a reusing ending, and was certainly handled with care. For the rest, the film fashions elements of "The Wages of Fear" and provides many delightful examples of the kind of sherdram dialogue than never allowed "F" movies to begin in expansion. At one point the head of the railroad combine, afraid that the convoy of trucks is going to win out, in desperation asks LeRoy Mason "Can you stop it?" Without a moment's hesitation he has done so (in scores of other "F" movies ) Mason comes back with a morschant and self-confidence "Yeah!" which tells us that his forte is no longer evolving all sorts of sabotage schemes even at this last moment! As a further example of "F" economy, you may also recognise the re-use of the distinctive main title music from James Whale's "The Kiss Before the Mirror".

--- 10 Minute Intermission ---

THE CROWD ROARS (MM, 1938) Directed by Robert Thorne; produced by Sam Zimbalist; screenplay by Thomas Lennon, George Bruce and George Oppenheimer from an original story by George Bruce; Camera, John Seitz; 92 mins. NY premiere, Capitol Theatre.
With: Robert Taylor (Tommy McCoy); Edward Arnold (Jim Cain); Frank Morgan (Brian McCoy); Maureen O'Sullivan (Shelly Carson); William Gargan (Jemmy Martin); Lionel Stander ("Happy" Lane); Jane Wyman (Vivian); Nat Pendleton ("Pug" Walsh); Charles D. Brown (Bill Thorne); Gene Reynolds (Tommy McCoy as a boy); Don Barry (Pete Maritala); Don Douglas (Murray); Isabel Jewell (Mrs Martin); Van W. Marshall (John Ryan); Horace McMahon (Rocky); John Dilson (director); Dick Elliott (right spectactor); Al Hall, Anthony Warde (fighters); and Cyril Ring, Fred Graham, Paul Fix, Frank Sully, Maxie Resin, Dick Wessali, Dewey Robinson, Ray Walker, Ethel Dustin, Hepsey Atchley

Twice in 1938 - in this film and opposite Wallace Beery in "Stand Up and Fight" - MGM tried to upgrade Robert Taylor's romantic role to that of a he-man; the ploy worked rather better than it did for Nelson Eddy in "Let Freedom Ring", but basically what Taylor needed was more meatier, if more "natural" roles that didn't happen until the war years and films like "Ivanhoe". On its own merits though, "The Crowd Roars" (the title is rather as "Killer McCoy" with Mickey Rooney in the Taylor role) is still a very solidly entertaining movie. Prize-fight movies have gotten much gutsier and more realistic since "The Set-Up", and "The Crowd Roars" today won't seem as tough as it did in '38; even then, it was a Warner subject handled with MGM's kid gloves. But with that tremendous cast, Edward Arnold in a particularly satisfying role (Brian Donlevy was less effective in the remake), perhaps a little too much of Frances Dee, in which specialty, whether it be for comedy or drama (Keenan Wynn in the remake), and the overall MGM gloss and expertness, one is not inclined to carp in the interests of realism are not always served to the maximum. Critic at the time were well pleased, and felt that it was a successful effort to infuse a bit more vitality - and depth - into a Robert Taylor vehicle. Richard Thorne was no W.S. Van Dyke, but he was a thoroughly reliable workhorse. "The Crowd Roars" was one of six films he made for MGM in 1938, and the only one that wasn't a romance or a light comedy.

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Program ends approx. 10.29. Discussion and questions follow.

--- William K. Everson