The New School: Film Series 75: Program 40
April 22, 1946

Silent Melodramas: Piano Score Arranged & Played by Stuart Oderman

Arizona Express (Fox, 1924) Directed by Thomas Buckingham; scenario by Fred Jackson and Robert N. Lee from an original story by Lincoln Carter; Camera, Starke Wagner; 68 mins. With: Pauline Starke (Katherine Keith); Evelyn Brent (Lola Nichols); David Butler (Steve Butler); Anne Cormwall (Florence Brown); Harold Goodwin (David Keith); Francis McDonald (Victor Johnson); Frank Real (Judge Ashton); William Humphrey (Harry MacFarlane); Bud Jamieson (henchman).

That old plot-line of the race to save an innocent man from the death house has here been efficiently expanded so that the first half of the film is all exposition, the second half all chase. The film, not a western despite its title, keeps on the go all the time, and the climactic race to the rescue is a cavalcade of action and stunts, most of it the real thing, with only one miniature and a single photographic trick to help the stuntmen on their merry way, as they transfer to and fall off horses, locomotives and automobiles. After falls from heights and speeding vehicles that should have been lethal or at best bone-shattering, they pick themselves up, knock off the dust, and start all over again. The closing reels are especial fun for train fanatics, with much of the action taking place on that winding mountain-side spur-line between Los Angeles and San Diego that we've all come to know and love through such films as "Beggars of Life" and "Play Safe". After running the gamut of all possible action, the writers milk the suspense situation just a little bit more by a final bit of uncertainty. David Butler, who plays the energetic train employee, soon became a director himself; director Thomas Buckingham never got much beyond this kind of picture, turning out anything from one to three of them every year, including one for Tom Mix, but he clearly knew how to keep an action audience happy and satisfied.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

The Return of the Rat (Gainsborough-British, 1929) Directed by Graham Outts; Produced by Michael Balcon; Screenplay by Edgar Middleton, Angus MacPhail and A. Neil Lyons, based on the characters created for the original play "The Rat" by Ivor Novello and Constance Collier; Camera, Roy Overbaugh. 86 mins. With: Ivor Novello (Pierre Rouche:ron, The Rat); Isabel Jeans (Zelia de Gaumat); Mabel Foulton (Eistle); Bernard Nedell (Harrl); Gordon Harker (Morell); Marie Ault (Mare Colline); Scootch Kelly (Bill); Harry Terry (Alf); Gladys Frazier.

The last of the "Rat" trilogy (all directed by Outts, produced by Balcon, and co-starring Novello and Jeans) is the most melodramatic of them all, and the most elusive, apparently never having had any kind of U.S. release. In terms of plot and character, it is a satisfactory end to the group, but leaves one wondering about entry #2, "Triumph of the Rat", since at least one of the major characters (played by Mae Marsh in the first installment) was killed off, and there's no reference to it here! "The Return of the Rat" was made as a full silent then, like many British films of the late 20's, withdrawn from release and resissued a few months later in an extended form with sound sequences. This print is of the full version, sound scenes included, but without the sound track so that it could still play at the many unconverted silent cinemas. The additions seem to be mainly in musical sequences, and via some unfunny "comedy" inserts in which Bill and Alf yell at each other in full closeup. Luckily, while Bill and Alf come frequently, they do not stay around too long, and the overall rhythm of the film is not unduly impaired. It's a fine original toned print, well photographed by the Hollywood cinematographer Roy Overbaugh. The somewhat old-fashioned plot seems to delight in its out-dated quality; Gordon Harker, already well known as a good character comedian, plays the unspeakable villain like a road company Bill Sikes, even his make-up having a second-string Dickensian look to it. Bernard Nedell as the secondary villain is smoother, though his duel with The Rat seems dragged in by the heads, as though someone had just seen the wonderful Barrymore-Love duel in "Don Juan" and decided to copy it or at least its camera/editing techniques. Novello's profile and enormous stage popularity doubtless explain the success of three such odd films (we played the original 1925 "The Rat" some years ago) in Britain, but Anton Walbrook's re-playing of the role was much subtler and certainly more sympathetic, in '37.

--- William K. Everson

Program Ends: 10:30 approx. Discussion/questions follow

Post Scripts: A reminder that the snow-delayed film noir double-bill will take place on Tuesday, May 17.

And as a follow-up to the discussion about Chicago location-shooting on "Union Station" two weeks back ... it now seems that there was less shooting in Chicago than Paramount had claimed. The use of IA's Union Station - very recognisable in its establishing shot - was extended by using many interiors of IA's station, and by using those as a model for the studio mock-ups.

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