Two sprightly early 30's films

DADDY LONG LEGS (Fox, 1931) Directed by Alfred Santell; Screenplay by Sonya Levien and S.N. Behrman from the novel by Jean Webster; Camera, Lucien Andriot; 73 mins.

"Daddy Long Legs" was filmed earlier, as a Mary Pickford silent in 1919, and would be done again in 1955 as a glossy Technicolor vehicle for Fred Astaire and Leslie Caron. Shirley Temple's 1935 "Curly Top" was also a remarkably faithful remake, save for turning one orphan into two so that the romantic element could be salvaged, and incredibly the film carried no writing credit acknowledging its source.

From 1927 through the early 30's, Janet Gaynor had unofficially assumed Mary Pickford's throne as "America's Sweetheart," and this "Daddy Long Legs" is one of the most enjoyable, typical and least pretentious films from that relatively brief but highly profitable reign. It's based on one of the popular novels of Jean Webster, who specialised in light romantic fare; in fact it was probably her biggest success, and rather surprisingly it was her only work to be transferred to the screen. (A not dissimilar writer, Gene Stratton Porter, was given far more attention by Hollywood). Popular novelists in the teen years still had their roots in a Victorian age, and sentiment and simplicity were key elements. The popularity of some of these writers is today extremely hard to understand: Harol Bell Wright, for example, was both a clumsy and a dull writer. Hollywood took note of his popularity, bought his novels, but usually the result was a little more than his titch - often enhancing his reputation by making of the rewritten versions something far better and more substantial. But Jean Webster's books did have merit. It's unlikely that anybody coming across them for the first time in the 1980's would be wildly excited by them, but those who read them when they were fresh usually find that on re-reading them today, they retain all their charm. Likewise, "Daddy Long Legs" was a film that was tremendously popular in its day and was remembered with great affection. It's not easily seen today - in fact, only one or two prints are known to exist - but it is no let-down to those who saw it 50 years ago and are lucky enough to renew acquaintance today.

As you will see, not a great deal really happens in "Daddy Long Legs". There is no market for a book like that today, and no market for a film based on it. It is literally a visitor from a lost world, and therein lies much of its charm. Stories like this need above all else genuine honesty in their sentiment - enough discipline not to exploit and vulgarise the sentiment, yet at the same time no sense of being embarrassed by it. It also needs sincerity in the telling, so that the basically uneventful story never drags, that one doesn't have to wait for the predictable moments to catch up with the anticipation, and so that clichés, if they develop, are never tiresome. At a tight 72 minutes, "Daddy Long Legs" fills these easier-said-than-done structures rather nicely, and it is certainly helped along by the grace and charm of Janet Gaynor. Warner Baxter must have been one of the most over-worked actors in all of Hollywood during the 30's, appearing at his home studio, Fox, in picture after picture as a kind of resident all-purpose Colman-Flynn-Cable composite, when the scripts called for personalities like these, but the budgets didn't, and on frequent lamas to MGM, Warners and Columbia. Yet despite the number of films he made, and a proportionate number of bad ones, he always gave of his best - and seems particularly suited to his role here as the tired, world-weary millionaire, not quite as old as his cares make him appear, and able to be rejuvenated by love. At the time, the wildly "jazzed-up" 30's background of collegiate parties might have seemed an undue deviation from Jean Webster's original milieu, but today the 30's seem almost as sophisticated as the pre-20's - even to some casual racial remarks - and the passage of time has enabled the film to create its own period flavor. We did show the film once before, some ten years ago, as a last minute additional item with "Peter Pan", so many were unaware of its shewing. It was copied from the only surviving 35mm print, then deteriorating fast, and presumably now gone beyond recall. You can see the beginning of the decay in the slightly mottled quality of this print, and the increased surface noise of the sound track - a frequent issue, which doesn't in any way mitigate against clearness of the dialogue, but which, it is worth stressing, is unavoidable in the print itself. While it's a pity that such a charming and representative film isn't available in pristine condition, we are really lucky to have it at all - and if this copy had not been made when it was, and delayed for even a year, the quality would have been infinitely worse.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

SHOW GIRL IN HOLLYWOOD (First National, 1930) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy; scenario by Harvey Thew and James A. Starr from "Hollywood Girl" by J.P. McEvoy; Camera, Sol Polito; 80 mins.

It is just over ten years since we last ran this delightful film, so a revival is well in order. One of six films that LeRoy directed in 1930 ("Little Caesar" being the most famous) "Show Girl in Hollywood" is an odd but very satisfying film. Its origins were on the stage, one show being a huge success, a follow-up less so. It starts slowly but builds steadily and even though it never becomes a major work, either as musical or as a drama, it is a film that one remembers.

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Although it has no pretensions to the cynical reality of a film like "Sunset Boulevard", it is still a surprisingly honest picture about day-to-day Hollywood (at least as it was then) and moreover, unlike most such films, seems "right" in its details. It is not reconstructing Hollywood's past, but using contemporary Hollywood as a background, and since 1930 was a year of great technological change in Hollywood, it even has a mildly documentarian flavor in its coverage of such production details as the old "sweat box" camera. Herman Bing, not yet a character comedian, literally plays himself as an assistant director (he came to this country in that capacity with F.W. Murnau). And in these days when so many female stars hang on to their stardom like grim death despite their age (one feels that, like Marge in "Lost Horizon", they will probably crumble and decay should they ever leave the protection of Hollywood with its age-delaying juices and lenses) it's a starting reminder that in the earlier days of the movies, a female star could be considered a has-been once she was past 30. In this role, former Griffith star Blanche Sweet (still very active here in NY) gives a beautiful and touching performance, her attempted suicide scene both a dramatic highlight and a kind of homage to the purely pictorial style of film-making that had temporarily vanished with the coming of sound. The film has pace and zip, good musical numbers and dialogue, and is generally a remarkably "modern" film for that transitional period. The final sequence, originally in Technicolor, today unfortunately exists only in black-and-white, but if you cast your mind back to our opening program two weeks ago, you'll know what it looked like, and can make a mental transformation. Lastly it is worth commenting on the fact that Alice White's role here was oddly prophetic. She had a limited talent, but a less limited personality, and Warners was the ideal studio for her. She might have emulated the success of Jean Blandell had not her aggression and her ego stood in the way, making her so difficult to deal with that even Maryn LeRoy - who liked her, and used her a great deal - finally gave up on her.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.15.

SACK CLOTH AND ASHES DEPT.

Abject apologies must be offered for the sound problem last week. I am particularly sorry that poor sound on one machine meant switching to the other machine, which in its turn was offering below standard light illumination. This was particularly unfortunate in view of the theme of the program - color superiority in the 40's. Luckily you did have a chance to see VASSY, or half of it, on the machine with good light before its sound gave out, so you know how all of it should have looked. However, if anyone was particularly disappointed or irked, please drop me a line (with your address) c/o the New School, and I will be glad to notify you of other screenings I may have, or if the number of people applying is small, set up a special screening for them. I'll be pretty much on the move until after Labor Day, with assignments keeping me out of town pretty constantly until then, so any such screening/s would be after Labor Day.

When machines break down, it is useless trying to pin point blame or explain mechanics. It just shouldn't happen - or if it does, better emergency solutions should be available. Hopefully there will be no recurrence of last week's problem over the Summer, and rather more positive steps are being taken in terms of standby equipment from the Fall series on. Again, apologies, and thanks for your forbearance.

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