

A Tribute to ROBERT FLOREY

Robert Florey, who died earlier this year, was a director whose work we have often exhibited and espoused in these New School showings, via such films as "The Hole in the Wall", "I Sell Anything", "The Outcast" and "The Preview Murder Mystery". Florey loved film, wrote about film, frequently incorporated filmic and/or Hollywood themes into his films, worked uncredited as assistant to major directors like Chaplin, and above all had a special genius for getting the most out of "B" pictures. Where the commonplace would have satisfied both the studio and the audience, he went out of his way to add style and enthusiasm to routine scripts, making more than the most of limited budgets and overall studio facilities. Oddly enough, when he was given more money to work with, his bigger pictures often disappointed - and the best of them still looked like elaborate "B" pictures. Certainly it was in the tight, well-knit little actioner or mystery that his real genius lay, and tonight's triple bill is a good cross-section of the kind of film that he did best - and all for the studio, Paramount, where he had his best results. Despite this being a triple bill, the running times are brief, and the whole program will not run longer than a longish double-bill. For the record, other Florey films of note, some of which we have played and others of which we'll certainly get to in time, include COCOANUTS, THE BATTLE OF PARIS, MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, THE DESERT SONG, GOD IS MY CO-PILOT, THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS, THE FACE BEHIND THE MASK, TWO IN A TAXI, PAROLE FIXER, SHIP CAFE, HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD, DAUGHTER OF SHANGHAI, HOTEL IMPERIAL, THE FLORENTINE DAGGER, THE VICIOUS YEARS, ROGUES' REGIMENT.

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KING OF ALCATRAZ (Paramount, 1938) Directed by Robert Florey; original story & screenplay, Irving Reis; Camera, Harry Fischbeck; Music, Boris Morros; 5 rls. With: Lloyd Nolan, Robert Preston, Gail Patrick, Harry Carey, J. Carrol Naish, Anthony Quinn, Porter Hall, Gustav von Seyffertitz, Tom Tyler, Paul Fix, Monte Blue, Harry Worth, Dennis Morgan, Richard Denning, Virginia Dabney, Virginia Vale, Nora Cecil, Emory Parnell, John Hart, Phillip Warren, Jack Norton, Stanley Blystone, Eddie Acuff, Dick Rich, Edward Marr, Konstantin Shayne, Clay Clement, Pierre Watkin.

Despite their famous slogan "If it's a Paramount Picture it's the Best Show in Town!", Paramount's "A" features in the 30's were often dull, padded and stodgy films made with both eyes on every possible economy. The glory that had been theirs in the very early thirties - West and Fields at their best, Lubitsch, von Sternberg and Mamoulian at their prime - was replaced by second-string work from deMille, Leisen, Walsh, Lloyd and Vidor, and it wasn't until the 40's - Sturges, Wilder, a revitalised Leisen, visits from Lang, Siodmak and Milestone - that their standards were given a needed shaking-up. But if there were too many disappointing and overblown "A"s in the 30's (like "Wells Fargo" and "Spawn of the North") there was no shortage of expert little "B"s, primarily fast crime and gangster films, though one shouldn't overlook the fine little westerns from the Zane Grey and Hopalong Cassidy units, all of them offering far more action and superbly-photographed location work than the studio-bound specials like "The Plainsman". "King of Alcatraz" is a perfect example of the high standards that these little films achieved. It's the product of a well-oiled machine, and it didn't really have to be as good as it is. It could have ambled along with half the pace, half the care and half of that incredible cast and still been a decent little picture that would have cost less, and grossed just as much in its undemanding program slot. But obviously Florey did care, and makes maximum use of standing sets and under-contract talent (players, cameraman, etc.) to get the most gloss, polish and technique-rich values out of a humble property. "King of Alcatraz" has no earth-shattering script nor even any really unusual action sequences. Much of its dialogue is absolutely typical, functional "B" picture dialogue - and some of it, such as Pierre Watkin's radioed instruction for a shipboard operation, is unavoidably hilarious. But it moves constantly, the players speak their lines as though they believe in them, the standout camerawork and lighting is given all the precision and thought that cinematographer Fischbeck gave to Griffith's "The Sorrows of Satan" a dozen years earlier, and the editing, following Florey's established pattern, is always brisk. No long dialogue takes, no lengthy expositions - everything that happens keeps the story on the move, and gets it told well, and with much camera mobility and change of angle, in a mere 56 minutes! As for the cast, it's full of contract players doing their usual stunts, stars-to-be (Quinn, Preston, Morgan, Denning) learning their trade, and grand old veterans (von Seyffertitz, Tom Tyler, Carey, Blue), delivering as expected, probably hand-picked by Florey out of respect for their past work, and giving their all despite (in some cases) not even making the wrap-up cast list, let alone the introductory credits. Today especially, when so many films either deliberately (or accidentally, though a basic lack of expertise) cultivate a non-professional, off-the-cuff look, as though amateurism is a blood-brother to honesty, it's a real pleasure to sit back and watch the craftsmanship of this supremely unimportant but eminently

enjoyable pocket thriller. ("Grease" by the way is a perfect example of the contemporary "major" film and top grosser made without even the most rudimentary knowledge of what basic technique, let alone craftsmanship, is all about).

--- Five Minute Intermission ---

DEATH OF A CHAMPION (Paramount, 1939) Directed by Robert Florey; Screenplay by Stuart Palmer and Courtland Fitzsimmons from an original story by Frank Gruber; Camera, Stuart Thompson; 6 reels
With Lynne Overman, Donald O'Connor, Virginia Dale, Joseph Allen jr., Harry Davenport, Robert Paige, May Boley, Susan Paley, Hal Brazeal, Frank M. Thomas, David Clyde, Walter Soderling, Pierre Watkin, Bob McKenzie, Guy Usher.

"Death of a Champion" is a perfect example of Florey's innate good taste. It's an unusually solid and well-written little mystery tale, fashioned by experts in the field, and doesn't need technical razzle-dazzle to conceal paucity of plot or to infuse artificial speed and pace. So Florey is content to sit back (more than usual at least) and let a troupe of excellent actors, and the plot itself, take care of the narrative. He gets some nice menacing shadow effects into a couple of suspense sequences, and the film has his usual brisk pacing with no long static takes, but dialogue is important and Florey never tries to divert attention away from it. The identity of the killer isn't unduly hard to spot, though it was more of a surprise in 1939. A major asset of the film is the delightful team-work of Lynne Overman and Donald O'Connor as a pair of unwitting sleuths. So well were they received that Paramount might well have been tempted to continue teaming them in a series -- but fortunately they didn't, and this film thus stands alone as a unique and off-beat little mystery.

--- Five Minute Intermission ---

KING OF GAMBLERS (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Robert Florey; screenplay by Doris Anderson from a story by Tiffany Thayer; Camera, Harry Fishbeck; Music, Boris Morros; Music & Lyrics, Ralph Rainger, Leo Robin, Richard Whiting, Burton Lane; 7 reels.

With Claire Trevor, Lloyd Nolan, Akim Tamiroff, Larry Crabbe, Porter Hall, Harvey Stevens, Barlowe Borland, Helen Burgess, Purnell Pratt, Colin Tapley, Paul Fix, Cecil Cunningham, Robert Gleckler, Frank Puglia, Nick Lukats, Fay Holden, John Patterson, Evelyn Brent, Fred Kohler.

Although not the first film in his second (post-Warner) Paramount contract, "King of Gamblers" was the first in his series of crime/gangster films for them, is by far the most elaborate, the longest, and one of the best. At the time it was undoubtedly considered, along with "The Outcast" and "Hollywood Boulevard", as a programmer rather than a "B", although of course the dividing line between those two classifications at a major studio was always somewhat vague. The production comments we made earlier relative to "King of Alcatraz" apply equally well to this picture; just how mountainous a silk-purse Florey fashioned out of a molehill of a sow's ear can be gleaned by comparing this film with another parallel one in Paramount's crime series, "King of Chinatown" - wherein director Nick Grinde fails to improvise and experiment and build, and winds up with a tolerably slick little film that is as good as, but certainly no better than, the routine script material it had to work with. "King of Gamblers" (the title has scant relation to the plot, a comment that might be applied to "King of Alcatraz" as well) does almost too good a job on itself. It's almost big enough and long enough to be an "A", and some of Florey's breathless pacing is lost thereby. But it's one of his most handsome films, full of bravura cuts and angles, an especially lively montage/action opening, and an adroit way of circumventing the Production Code (in relation to the Tamiroff-Trevor liason) and letting the audience know what is really going on, even if it can't spell it out. The cast is full of old favorites, and one wonders whether Evelyn Brent and Fred Kohler, in their atmospheric scene together, recalled their former glories for von Sternberg in "Underworld". Helen Burgess, one of Paramount's more promising new stars, died before the release of the film. Quite incidentally, the film was once listed among Louise Brooks' credits - and certainly, Florey is the kind of director who would have gone out of his way to utilize her. She once mentioned that she had been totally edited out of the film, and I certainly don't recall ever having spotted her, even in the background. But I notice that in recent writings, she has reinstated the title among her credits, so maybe a little extra attention to the backgrounds may be in order this evening!

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 11.04. No discussion session this evening, and no screening next Friday because of the Holiday weekend. We resume on Nov.30 with more slick and enjoyable crime - THE PENGUIN POOL MURDER and FROM HEADQUARTERS.