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Heroes for Sale

(Directed by William Wellman, 1933)

Relevant? Heroes for Sale is right on. Wellman's film is a Depression movie, closer to Fritz Lang's Fury (1936) or Frank Borzage's A Man's Castle (1933) than to Ernst Lubitsch's comic Design for Living (also made in 1933). Like the Borzage and Lang films, which both star Spencer Tracy, Heroes for Sale is about a good, attractive, hard-working young man, Tom Holmes, played by Richard Barthelmess. He is more serious than Tracy in Borzage's movie, or in the beginning of ~~Kangis~~ Fury, and never as crazed as Tracy after the mob scene in Lang's masterpiece.

That Tom Holmes won't defend himself against the circumstances which threaten him makes Heroes for Sale an embodiment of the Depression, and of depression, in every detail. For he is the hero, and the movie is his story. From the first episode, Holmes accepts pain without expressing anger. He is beyond selfish attachment to glory or medals; obviously, these are not worth fighting for. He agrees to the snivelling Roger's (played by Gordon Westcott) plea not to reveal him as a coward, not to reveal himself, Tom, as the real hero. Always he acts "right" and never simply in his own interest. Always, he ends up worse off than he was before. Tom absorbs a series of disasters that have each been the major event of more than one movie: drug addiction, death of true love (here, as in A Man's Castle, the girl is beautifully portrayed by Loretta Young), innocent man sent to jail, etc. Holmes' story is a dictionary of the blues, put together so that each new catastrophe both shocks and seems an inevitable development. (Because this movie is about the Depression, or depression, Holmes never sees hardship as a Revoltin' Development, as in "What a revoltin' development dis is!")

Wellman picks up the story in World War I. He doesn't use newsreel footage or shoot on location. His movie is a studio creation. But like the two chase sequences in Lubitsch's To Be or Not To Be (1942) or the chase through the woods in Lang's Manhunt (1941), Heroes for Sale has the texture of reality. Even Wellman's police-breaking-up-a-demonstration look like the real McCoy.

Wellman's secondary characters enliven the film, making it dense with human detail: Max the Red's clucking, Mary's unrequited love for Tom, Pop's lovable generosity. Every character has character. Barthelmess is the least flamboyant and the most constant; he is simply "good." All good people (we) love him, because of (despite) strength and endurance in the face of virtually endless suffering, trapped by the "higher values" that he embodies, believes in, and defends.

Wellman makes clear the bitter irony of the heroes' fate as victims of the Depression, giving the movie a bite, an edge, that the "good" characters lack, and the "bad" ones pervert. Revelations add new dimensions of significance: the coward is a rich banker's son, who betrays Tom when he needs him in peace as he did in war. In the end, both are again part of America's army: the army of homeless, jobless men of the Depression. As they march along the road, with no end in sight, Barthelmess speaks his last line: "At least it's stopped raining." Tom's remark is followed by the movie's last scene, which ends on his son's wish: "When I grow up, I want to be like Daddy." It is a sad ending. Wellman knows that the Depression is a bad joke.

Film note by Ellen Mandel