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1917: TOD BROWNING, VAN DYKE

Improbably, Tod Browning, having run away from school to join a circus, was a vaudeville comic at the time he went into movies as an actor at the Biograph studios. He played in Griffith's *The Mother and the Law*, was one of the Master's assistants on *Intolerance* and directed his own first full-length picture in 1917. From 1918 to 1923 he directed a series of programme pictures for Universal — most of them routine melodramas though *The Virgin of Stamboul* is admirable. Between 1923 and 1925 Browning took to drink. In 1925 he was taken on by M-G-M and began the series of films with Lon Chaney that must rank among the most extraordinary pictures ever made. *The Unholy Three*, about a transvestite ventriloquist, a dwarf and a strong man who conduct a criminal business under cover of a pet store, was a promising (and profitable) beginning. After a more conventional crime film, *The Mystic* (1925), Browning and Chaney embarked on a series of seven further films — *The Blackbird* (1926), *The Road to Mandalay* (1926), *The Unknown* (1927), *London after Midnight* (1927), *The Big City* (1928), *West of Zanzibar* (1928) and *Where East is East* (1929). The premises of the films were outrageous. In *The Blackbird* Chaney plays the dual role of a crippled bishop and a crook who impersonates him. In *The Unknown* he is an armless wonder in love with Joan Crawford. In *West of Zanzibar* he is a crippled magician seeking revenge on Lionel

Barrymore. Browning, a conscientious, painstaking craftsman at all times, was possessed of a uniquely strange vision, which saw a sort of beauty in horror.

W. S. Van Dyke was another theatrical child who found his way into the movies. His father died before his birth, and he travelled about with his actress mother. As a youth he followed his mother into the acting profession, then, like Browning, became one of Griffith's six assistants on *Intolerance*. His first film was *The Land of Long Shadows* (1917). In the Thirties Van Dyke was to become one of M-G-M's most reliable and versatile directors, equal to anything from *The Thin Man* and *Andy Hardy* to *Naughty Marietta* and *Marie Antoinette*.

But Van Dyke's inclinations always took him out of doors. He started in Westerns, and frequently throughout his career came back to the horse opera. Characteristically, a flat, overdressed M-G-M glossy like *Winners of the Wilderness* (1927) comes to life the moment that Tim McCoy is loosed into the hills and forests. And apart from the *Thin Man* series the films one most readily associates with Van Dyke are out-of-doors subjects, *Trader Horn* (1931), *Tarzan of the Apes* (1932), *Eskimo* (1933). In the silent period he is chiefly remembered for the picturesque *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928) which he took over after Flaherty's quarrel with M-G-M.