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THE NEW SCHOOL & FILM CLUB #13: Program 7

"STREET ANGEL" (Fox, 1928) Directed by Frank Borzage

Adaptation by Philip Klein and Henry Roberts Symonds, and continuity by Marion Orth, from the play "Lady Cristallinda" by Monckton Hoffer, later issued in novel form as "Street Angel"; Camera, Ernest Palmer and Paul Ivano; Sets, Harry Oliver; Special Effects, Alfredo Sabato; 10 reels With Janet Gaynor, Charles Farrell, Natalie Kingston, Henry Armetta, Guido Trento, Alberto Ragabliati, Frank Reicher.

A tremendous artistic and commercial success, "Street Angel" was cited by the NY Times for its "new peak of perfection in photography" - probably a simplified way of saying production design, for one cannot really separate sets and lighting from camerawork. The praise is understandable, for in a good original 35mm print, the film is pictorially breath-taking; even in this first-generation dupe (which should be a good deal better than it is, thanks to the shoddy standards accepted by Hollywood labs today) it is still quite stunning. But in other ways, the film is too heavy and too calculated an attempt to fuse the artistic and commercial elements of both "Sunrise" and "Seventh Heaven" (two Fox films of 1927) into one "sure-fire" blockbuster. Both of those films had had majestically simple stories, but here the plot is just too fragile and even silly to hold up under 10 reels of "prestige" treatment. Borzage, a sensitive director, was able to work his magic best on the films about the "little" slices of life, where he was able to add and build with that indefinable quality of rich emotionalism that was so uniquely his. He was less successful on the "big" themes - "The Green Light", "Little Man What Now?" - where he had no chance to be better than his scripts. "Street Angel" is too overblown from the beginning to ring true, and is far too "arty" a production for moments of honesty and uncalculated sentiment to slip in unawares. But fortunately its visual aspect is so stylised as to be sufficient in itself: the astonishing mobility of the camera roving around a huge set, the harsh, Germanic, geometric compositions, the ever-present mist, all of these confirm the suggestions of other recently rediscovered Fox films of 1927-34 that F.W. Murnau's influence on the directors, cameramen and designers working for Fox at that time was immeasurable. So enjoy Janet Gaynor's charm, enjoy the visuals, forget the script with its vague relationships and melodramatic excesses, and overlook (if you can) the too-heavy original musical score which dings its theme song "Angela Mia" into one's brain incessantly via the score, vocals, and even by whistling! Incidentally, take note of the particularly neat piece of visual trickery which transforms Catalina Bay into Naples, simply by careful placement of the camera and a partial glass-shot.

--- W.K. Everson ---