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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Programmers from the early 30's

If, of late, we seem to have indicated a leaning towards fairly unimportant programmers of the thirties, it's not because we're trying to start a new cult, or suggesting that unrecognised artistry lies hidden within them. It's just that the film society is getting to be the only real outlet for these interesting and entertaining minor films, wherein is so much of the "little" film history of Hollywood. With more and more major product available to tv, the early programmers are shunted aside on television, or relegated to obscure late shows. The official archives will almost certainly never show them. More and more attention is being paid to the "rediscovered" classics of the 30's, and I think I shall go berserk if one more film magazine discovers von Sternberg, and does an "in depth" piece on him. Since the Sternbergs were in widespread reissue distribution in the late 40's and very early 50's, one can only assume that the current re-discoverers are in their 20's, and bowled over with youthful exuberance presume that "their" discoveries of the values of Sternberg, Sturges et al are being made now for the first time. Be that as it may, the "little" films of the 30's are being pushed more and more into obscurity, and while it may not be a matter of major import that they be brought back into the sunlight again, many of them do rate that consideration. At any rate, we can enjoy them now on their own level, before the cultists exhaust the Sternberg-Lubitsch vein, and launch themselves into exhaustive and overblown studies of the careers of Nick Grinde, Phil Rosen and Lew Landers.

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("SHOPWORN") (Columbia, 1932) Directed by Nicholas Grinde; original story and scenario by Sarah Y. Mason; Dialogue: Jo Swerling and Robert Riskin; Camera: Joseph Walker; editor: Gene Havelick; 7 reels
With Barbara Stanwyck, Regis Toomey, Zasu Pitts, Lucien Littlefield, Clara Blandick, Robert Alden, Oscar Apfel, Maude Turner Gordon, Albert Conti, Wallis Clarke, Edwin Maxwell, Joe Sawyer, Harry Semels, Sidney Bracey, Hal Price, Selmer Jackson, Gertrude Astor.

Nicholas Grinde was one of Hollywood's most prolific and workmanlike grade B directors, for years turning out westerns, actioners, melodramas, mysteries and soap operas. "Sequoia" was probably the closest he ever got to a real "class" production, and the bulk of that was directed by Chester Franklin. In his best days - the early thirties - when he had an MGM contract, he always billed himself as Nicholas Grinde. Later, when he concentrated more and more on actioners - Buck Jones westerns, Jack Holt melodramas, and such Warner thrillers and semi-expose films as "Public Enemy's Wife" and "White Bondage", he dropped the Nicholas in favor of the more zippy Nick. Somehow Nick Grinde is a name that conjures up an impression of an underworld hood turning out movies like sausages. So, in an attempt to regain a little prestige, he added an accent to the "e" in his surname. Unfortunately the gesture went unappreciated, just as W.C. Fields adding an accent to his name, "Souise", in "The Bank Dick" didn't materially alter the image of his screen character there! However, "Shopworn" is a good, typical example of the Grinde directorial "style". It borrows from everywhere; when the script falters, it falters; but it moves. The story is told simply and briefly, and if at times it all seems very old hat, then one has the feeling that Grinde wasn't aware of it and really thought he was doing something worthwhile.

Of course, this type of film was so much a part of the thirties that it's absurd to call it old-hat today. It is, but then so are "The Trespasser", "Platinum Blonde", and half of the Stanwyck-Crawford-Swanson films of the period. Actually, "Shopworn" does have its differences. It starts like Stanwyck's "Baby Face" and continues with the same basic plot, but it's less hard-boiled and cynical than the Warner films. Perhaps the characters are a little more old-fashioned and perhaps more out of a woman's magazine of the late 20's rather than a Hollywood script of the 30's, but there's a certain warmth to it, and a more relaxed pace than one usually gets in the early 30's. The opening mountain exteriors are pleasant and well-photographed; from then on, with time out for the expected tirades, Stanwyck rushes through illicit romance, prison, a lost illegitimate child and an improbably rapid rise to fame, covering so much ground in 72 minutes that there is literally nothing left for a climax, and so the film just finishes. But it's all enjoyable, simple-minded soap opera - unpretentious, influenced to a mild extent by Capra perhaps, and despite its weaknesses, a good deal better than many similar and far more expensive films ("Bought" for example, and "Illicit") of the same period.

Wm. K. Everson