

A Program of Saturday Afternoon Adventures

THE BIG CAGE (Universal, 1933) Directed by Kurt Neuman. Screenplay by Edward Anthony and Ferdinand Reyher from the book of the same name by Clyde Beatty and Edward Anthony; Camera, George Robinson; 75 mins.

With Clyde Beatty, Anita Page, Wallace Ford, Mickey Rooney, Raymond Hatton, Vince Barnett, Andy Devine, Robert McWade, Reginald Parlow, Edward Piel, Wilfrid Lucas, Tom London, Louise Beavers, Wade Boteler, Walter Brennan, Louise Carver.

Part of the loose cycle of sensationalised stunt animal pictures that followed in the wake of MGM's initial Tarzan movie - a cycle that included "King of the Jungle", "Rango", "Nagana" and of course "King Kong" - "The Big Cage" is grand Saturday matinee fare for the youngsters, and expertly staged hoke, but it is slightly less universal in its appeal than most of the others. If you like tigers, it'll prove to be an ecstatic experience; if you don't, there may be odd moments of tedium. There is so much talk about, and action revolving around, the business of putting Clyde Beatty into a cage with a group of lions and tigers that - no matter how enterprising such an event may be - one occasionally wishes that they'd put him in the cage with Anita Page instead. The dynamic Miss Page is rather subdued here, surprisingly effective dramatically, but off-screen a good deal, and supplied with a role that Cecelia Parker could have handled just as well - as indeed she did in that other Clyde Beatty film, "The Lost Jungle". The dramatics make the most of every possible cliché (the performer turned coward, the has-been headliner with an adoring son) and the comedy is hardly inspired. Primarily it is used as punctuation, methodically placed after each thrill sequence. Nevertheless, the animal sequences are excitingly done, and are really the whole show. Even if tricky editing helps out once in a while, they are largely unfaked and do pack quite a punch. (They also turned up as stock footage in later Universal "B" movies, most notably and outrageously in "Captive Wild Woman", shown here a few seasons back, where the credits generously thanked Beatty for his "cooperation" in staging the animal scenes!) Incidentally, typical of the unwitting and casually accepted racism of the 30's: a line given to the captain of a ship makes him seem quite unconcerned that an escaped tiger killed a couple of natives, but somewhat indignant that is also mauled a sailor! Mickey Rooney's performance by the way is quite exceptionally good; he also appeared with Beatty in "The Lost Jungle", and with Tom Mix in another Neuman-directed film for Universal, "My Pal The King".

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

40,000 HORSEMEN (Famous Feature Films, Australia, 1938-40) Directed and Produced by Charles Chauvel; written by Chauvel in collaboration with E.V. Timms; Camera: George Heath; 2nd unit camerawork by Frank Hurley, Tasman Higgins and John Howes; Music, Lindley Evans; released in Australia by Universal, and in the USA (in 1941) by Sherman Krellberg-Goodwill Pictures. 80 mins.

With: Betty Bryant, Grant Taylor, John Goffage (Chips Rafferty), Pat Twohill, Harvey Adams, Eric Rieman, Joe Valli, Albert C. Winn, Kenneth Brampton, John Fleeting, Kenneth Brampton, Harry Abdy, Norman Maxwell, Pat Penny, Charles Zoll, Claude Turtin, Theo Liannos, Sgt. Roy Mannix. NY premiere: Globe Theatre, August 1941.

Somehow in our advance bulletins, the title of this film got whittled down to "20,000 Horsemen", and there is no increase in admission for those extra 20,000 -- especially as in her biography of her director husband, Elsa Chauvel refers to 500 horsemen being used in the charge sequence, which realistically means 250!

In Australia, understandably, but also in England and in the U.S., the film was a huge hit on its original release. In England, released by Universal's British arm, it played a major circuit, and in the U.S. it played far more dates than any Australian sound film to date, and got good, rousing, commercial reviews if not raves for its artistry. It was certainly the most elaborate sound film made in Australia to that date, and though dealing with the Anzacs' participation in World War One, it still had decided topicality in that it went into release just as the Australian forces were again fighting in the middle East. It has been a difficult film to track down, but one that should have been of special interest in that in it one might expect to find the roots of some of the more recent and more celebrated Australian war films. In that sense it is probably a little disappointing, but it does have both academic and historic interest, and is certainly still an entertaining piece of hokum though more in the Hollywood than Australian tradition.

Most Australian directors, especially the ambitious ones, rarely had a chance to be prolific. Charles Chauvel had made two silents, and only three talkies (including the first "Bounty" film, with Errol Flynn as Fletcher Christian) * prior to

* to be accurate, the first talkie "Bounty" film. The Australians had also made two silent versions.

launching "40,000 Horsemen" in 1938. He had more than a normal Australian enthusiasm for the subject since it was his uncle, Sir Harry Chauvel, who had commanded the huge cavalry force that fought in the Sinai campaign in World War One. However, he found it very difficult to raise the forty thousand pounds needed to budget the film, and hit on the idea of shooting the spectacular cavalry charge climax first, and using that sequence as a come-on to raise the rest of the money. Actually the idea worked surprisingly well, although there were problems. The army would only loan the horses for one day's shooting, and weather was unreliable. Chauvel insured himself against rain. It did rain and he collected a sizeable sum. But the rain stopped by early afternoon, and with a battery of cameramen (including Frank Hurley, one of Australia's finest documentarian and location cinematographers) he still managed to get the impressive charge sequence, and sundry horse falls, on film in one afternoon. (Though this explains why it isn't too well integrated into the climax of the film!) Universal, with whom Chauvel had been trying to form a Hollywood alliance for some time, turned it down for the U.S. market (possibly because of mild language and a sex scene which ran contrary to the prevailing Production Code rulings) though doing well with it at home and in England.

Chauvel, due no little to later propagandising by his widow, has been very much over-rated as a major Australian director. Certainly he had nowhere near the artistry or imagination of Australia's finest director, Raymond Longford, nor did he have the workmanlike expertise of Australia's most prolific filmmaker, Ken Hall. While his themes were always very nationalistic, his style was pure Hollywood. He was clearly star-struck, and on a visit to Hollywood in the mid-30's managed to get himself photographed with as many stars as possible (from Tyrone Power and Sonja Henie to Johnny Mack Brown and Chief Thundercloud) but significantly, never with major creative writers or directors! More than anything else, "40,000 Horsemen" betrays his love of the Hollywood style, and Uncle Harry (if he survived at that point) might not have been too happy to find his famous campaign hoked up to Hollywood formula standards. Actually the film most resembles, in its welding of fiction and documentary, the 1929 British "Balaclava" -- but there are also very clear "borrowings" from "Lives of a Bengal Lancer", "The Big Parade" and others. There are alas, a few production crudities: occasionally people speak and the dialogue, to be dubbed in later, never was! Editing is a little ragged, sound somewhat substandard, and the Australian accents particularly hard to follow. Since the narrative is never very cohesive anyway, it is sometimes a little difficult to figure out just what is going on in terms of military campaigning. But the action is lively, the photography quite fine, the German villain clearly a villain, so the basics come through. The trick is to regard it more as a historic highspot in Australian film, rather than an early competitor to "Gallipoli". It would also be a little easier to follow in spots if the musical score wasn't in such aggressive competition with the dialogue being spoken at the same time!

Its success however did spur the frequency of Chauvel's work somewhat: subsequently he made three quite elaborate features, and a large number of documentaries, and one of his post-war films ("The Sons of Matthew") did achieve his cherished dream of getting a U.S. release through Universal. "40,000 Horsemen" also launched the careers of Chips Rafferty, Grant Taylor and Michael Pate (only an extra in the film, but later a star in Australia and featured player in Hollywood) and would have launched the career of heroine Betty Bryant who though inexperienced, clearly has star quality. However, on a publicity tour for the film she met, fell in love with and married a top MGM executive and retired from acting.

Handsomely made despite its occasional crudities -- probably caused by a still tight budget -- the film's interior scenes were done at the Cinesound Studios, with the middle East village sets elaborately constructed on the Cronulla sandhills. Riding scenes and stuntwork (some of the horsefalls provided by a Russian cossack!) do have a Hollywoodian efficiency to them. Wm.K.Everson --

Notes:

Please be advised that of the MGM films, all have been confirmed EXCEPT "This Side of Heaven" (March 1). The substitution will be NIGHT COURT (1932, dir: W.S. Van Dyke, with Walter Huston, Anita Page and Lewis Stone) giving us a nice gutsy crime double-bill with PUBLIC HERO #1.

My apologies to those who were inconvenienced by the sudden cancellation of the series last Fall. Summer series are arranged and booked to run without me, but the other two series depend on my availability for pickup and return of prints, notes that can't be written ahead of time, etc. Since I was clearly still going to be incarcerated in a Rocky Mountain hospital when the series was due to get under way, there was just no option but to cancel. MANY thanks to all those of you who very kindly sent notes or get-well cards, sometimes signed only as "The cheerful person in the 5th row" and so forth. All much appreciated ... and the spell of inactivity did at least allow for extra planning time devoted to upcoming series.

PROGRAM ENDS TONIGHT APPROX. 10.23. Discussion session follows.