

Hunting and Gathering: UCLA's Preservation Fest Salvages Forgotten Gems, Endangered Indies

By Philippe Garnier

This year the UCLA Film & Television Archive has moved its Festival of Preservation (the 14th edition) from summer to early spring, in the hope of luring a few students from the school's newly created department of Archive Studies. More than ever, it offers a wide range of genres, periods and interests, including the avant-garde, documentaries (like Emile de Antonio's still-vital *Point of Order*), music shorts (the Vitagraph Follies return!), newsreels, silents, film noir (Joseph Losey's *The Prowler*), chicano indies and Hal Roach slapsticks, but also, perhaps more shockingly, films we thought had never left us. Who would suspect John Sayles' 1980 debut, *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, needed care and restoring? Or *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), perhaps John Cassavetes' best and most successful film? It appears indies, even recent ones, pose special problems for restoration. *Woman* opens the festivities Friday night.

If ever there was a film that bridges arty indies and Hollywood lore, it's Josef von Sternberg's first feature, *The Salvation Hunters*. "Joe Stern" was barely 30 when he appeared in Hollywood in 1924 and fortuitously met British actor-turned-grocer George K. Arthur; it was a matter of days until he parted the lanky young man from his bankroll (a paltry \$6,000) and made a feature as a calling card for both. Using mostly amateurs for crew and cast, Sternberg wrote, produced, shot and directed this arty take on despair and poverty in which images of a dredge sucking up the mudflats of San Pedro are presented as "filming thought." D.W. Griffith, Lois Weber and even Cecil B. DeMille (in his heartfelt 1915 *Kindling*) had depicted poverty and hunger before, but Sternberg's film is, almost ruefully, all aesthetics. As George Eastman House co-founder James Card wrote in his excellent *Seductive Cinema: The Art of Silent Film*, "the film is immature, self-indulgent, incredibly slow moving, but one thing it is undeniably — it is art. Not good art, perhaps, but astonishingly impressive art."

And it worked for all concerned: Arthur was signed by MGM and soon teamed with *The Big Parade*'s Karl Dane in a series of successful comedies. Chaplin hailed the film and had United Artists give it a distribution deal for more than it cost to make. He was so taken by it that he produced Sternberg's next picture and fired his own spouse from *The Gold Rush*, hiring *Salvation*'s Barbara Hale to replace her. Chaplin later reversed his judgment, as Sternberg's reputation rose; he even shelved *The Sea Gull* (a.k.a. *A Woman of the Sea*), the Sternberg film he bankrolled.

Neither *Young America* (1932) nor *Song O' My Heart* (1930) is Frank Borzage's best vintage — his studio, Fox, was starting to decline. In the first, Borzage's nimble camera work seems wasted on the pedestrian material, a sort of early version of *Boys Town*, with stories of boys in trouble told through a juvenile court. Still, it's amusing to watch Ralph Bellamy slouching at his judge's desk and raking his hair with his fingers like a cornpone James Dean. Borzage's own nephew, Raymond, plays the

pinched-faced teenage inventor Nutty, who provides the only surprise in the story. *Song O' My Heart* is more a producer's picture than a director's. In 1930, William Fox was still flush enough to allow producer J.J. McCarthy to pay tenor star John McCormack a half-million to sing 11 songs. To act, too, although you wouldn't know it. Borzage went to Dublin to film the singer at Moore Abbey, Erin, and at McCormack's home, but none of this footage was used. He did find young Maureen O'Sullivan there, bringing the Jane to Fox's Movietone studio and reshot everything on sets designed by Harry Oliver. J. Farrell MacDonald is there for comic relief, but *The Quiet Man* it ain't.

Raoul Walsh's *Women of All Nations* (1931), his third featuring his famous Marine rivals Sergeant Flagg (Victor McLaglen) and Sergeant Quirt (Edmund Lowe) from *What Price Glory?* (1926), may seem crude and vulgar today, but it's interesting to see what lowbrow entertainment consisted of in 1930. Every ethnic group gets insulted equally, and the fun is of course pre-Code (there are more unclad legs in Sweden than in the Moroccan harem). Only McLaglen would have women on the brain when Brigham Young happens to be mentioned, but it's the perennial Swede El Brendel who nails it: "Bring 'em young, and bring them often." Walsh knew how to make this kind of fare fly, just as no one makes a man fly through a closed door like he does (wood and plaster goes with it). Contrast this with the second-billed *Not Exactly Gentlemen* (1931), also starring McLaglen, this time in an unleavened Western by Ben Stoloff, a Tom Mix director at Fox. *Plastered in Paris*, another gem made the same year by Stoloff, might have answered *Women of All Nations* better.

Lowbrow entertainment is also on display in the backstage comedy *Pointed Heels* (1929), albeit in the sophisticated mode. But all the class brought by slick William Powell and Fay Wray is obliterated each time vaudeville duo Helen Kane and Skeets Gallagher appears. Max Fleischer is supposed to have based his Betty Boop on Helen "Sugar" Kane, but either Kane was over the hill by 1929, or Fleischer was a real gentleman.

The Film Parade is a real curio, a picture about the history of cinema made in 1933 by British émigré J. Stuart Blackton, who had co-founded the Vitagraph company in 1897, sold the company to Warner Bros. in 1925, and lost his fortune in the 1929 crash. For him, the flicks started in Egypt, and he shows us drawn figures seen behind columns from a moving chariot, claiming it was proto-zoetrope! He also uses a lot of Vitagraph footage but not just: When Warner refused him scenes from *The Jazz Singer*, Blackton sang "Mammy" himself, in blackface. Besides this resourceful man and his wife, *The Film Parade* also features ex-silent actress Margerie Bonner, not yet Mrs. Malcolm Lowry.

Blackton's faded glory is on display on the same UCLA bill, in William Humphrey's commendable 1911 version of *A Tale of Two Cities*. It had been filmed before (in 1907) and would be again many times, but this one is an eye-opener on the ambitions of Vitagraph, which was then testing the public's appetite for longer films and more complicated narratives. And at three reels, this makes a good attempt at telling Dickens' tale of the French Revolution. It is more *tableaux vivants* than real cinema, but the acting is exceptionally good (Maurice Costello especially), the makeup incredibly modern and the sets excellent, with one striking snow sequence actually shot on location. You can try to spot Norma Talmadge on her way to the guillotine, and even Mabel Normand as an extra.

The Naked Eye (1957) might sound like a dull doc on photography, but director Louis Stoumen was a shutterbug himself and has a good eye. Watch Alfred Eisenstaedt chat up the secretaries in the *Life* office, Edward Weston at Point Lobos, and Weegee in his bed-cum-darkroom screwing a dead cigar in his face before he even pulls on his suspenders in the morning.