

THIRTIES (1931-1940) SK-Z
All reviews by Michael J. Weldon

SKY RACKET (Sinister, 37) D Sam Katzman, S Basil Dickey

Wealthy Marion (Joan Barclay) wants to back out of her marriage to a Count (Duncan Renaldo), so she and her maid (Hattie McDaniel) escape out of a window and steal a car. Marion then hides in small plane being used by undercover agent #17 Eric Lane (Herman Brix aka Bruce Bennett). They both become captives of villain Ben Arnold (Monte Blue) who has been knocking mail planes out of the sky to rob with a ray machine. Marion jokes and smiles through it all and Eric dukes it out with bad guys. During one fight, fists are thrown right at the camera. Nightclub scenes include a singing dancing comic who does a funny song called "That's News" and a medicine show spiel. Also with Henry Roquemore and Jack Mulhall. Katzman, famous as a producer, is credited with directing only five movies, all in '37 for Victory. The same top stars were also in his AMATEUR CROOK.

SLAVE SHIP (37) D Tay Garnett, S Sam Hellman, Gladys Lehman, Lamar Troth, P Daryl F. Zanuck

I first watched this 20th Century Fox movie on TV when I was a little kid sitting alone in front of the family TV set. It confused me and freaked me out more than any horror movie. The story was by William Faulkner, based on The Last Slaver by George S. King. In 1860 after the international slave trade had been banned, slave ship owner Jim Lovett (Warner Baxter) falls in love with Nancy (Elizabeth Allan from MARK OF THE VAMPIRE) in Norfolk, Virginia and decides to retire. His big hard drinking lug of a first mate partner Jack Thompson (Wallace Beery) refuses to quit the lucrative business though and with the help of eager cabin boy Swifty (Mickey Rooney) tricks Jim and Nancy onto the cursed ship as they head for Africa. Hundreds of slaves (men and women) are bought from the friendly Portuguese Janela (Joseph Schildkraut), then are crowded into the dark hole of the ship where crewmen whip them and throw slop a them. When Lovett manages to steer the ship near the military base on St. Helens, Thompson has all of the helpless slaves thrown overboard. Each chained body pulls the next one down into the shark filled ocean. I don't think any movie before AMISTAD (97) or MIDDLE PASSAGE (02) showed this kind of horrifying historical accuracy and we sure as hell didn't learn anything about it in school. SLAVE SHIP mixes reality with romance, sentimentality, action, singing (by big Jane Jones who punches another woman in the face), much comedy (including an Uncle Tom's Cabin joke) - and a happy ending! Lovett would have been played by Clark Gable but MGM wouldn't loan him out. The male leads were three of the most popular and lovable actors of the time. Rooney, who became Andy Hardy at MGM the same year, chases a little black kid in Africa, declaring "I found him. He's mine!" Beery brags about the slaves he's thrown overboard and of the time they ate black boys to survive. Also with Jane Darwell as Nancy's mother, and George Sanders, Miles Mander, Arthur Hohl, and Francis Ford as ship mates. Notable bit parts are by Lon Chaney Jr., Charles Middleton, Matthew "Stymie" Beard, and Billy Bevan. Only one of the hundreds of blacks playing slaves was credited. She (Anita Brown) was later in SONG OF THE SOUTH. Garnett had been a gag man for Hal Roach and Mack Sennett. Oscar winning cinematographer Ernest Palmer later shot THE WOMAN EATER (59). The score is by Alfred Newman. I'll bet his nephew Randy saw this movie on TV before he wrote "Sail Away." Note: Peter Lorre was originally set to play the Janela slaver role.

SOUP TO NUTS (30) D Benjamin Stoloff, S Rube Goldberg

(RUBE GOLDBERG'S SOUP TO NUTS) This is the only filmed appearance of the original Stooges with Shemp (the oldest Stoooge, then 39). It's incredible to see

them doing many of the same gags they were still doing decades later. Top billed Ted Healy (then 44) works at a bankrupt Manhattan theatrical costume shop owned by the inventor Otto (Charles Winninger). Ted hangs out at the local firehouse and trades insults with the stooges and his gum chewing blonde girlfriend. Otto's niece falls for the son of the creditor and Otto goes to work as a waiter for a friend from the old country (both use some German words). A lot of surreal site gags involve other characters and the wonderful contraptions designed by famous cartoonist Goldberg (who appears briefly). This was during the depression (Healy sings a funny anti rich man song) and prohibition (the camera lingers on a bottle of booze). The stooges, who appear four times in the 65 min. Fox feature play firemen. They harmonize twice, slap each other, do routines while hanging on the side of a speeding fire truck and even fight a fire (remember IT'S A MAD MAD MAD MAD WORLD?). In one scene, Shemp explains "We ain't goin' to no fire. We're takin' some dames for a joy ride!" and yells to the driver to head for Coney Island. Larry stands still, demonstrating the elevator dance ("There's no steps to it!"). He and Harry (later Moe) still have normal haircuts. With Fred Sanborn, a silent movie style comic with cartoonish giant eyebrows and shoes as a mute fireman and a midget as a baby. Shemp stayed with the act, back doing vaudeville shows until 33, when he quit and was replaced by brother Curly (see above). I grew up watching Stooges shorts and playing Crazy Clock and Mouse Trap, three dimension board games inspired by Goldberg's cartoons.

THE SPIDER (31) D William Cameron Menzies, Kenneth MacKenna, S Barry Connors, Phillip Klein, P William Siström

This entire 65 min. Fox release, based on a play, takes place in a theater. With James Wong Howe as cinematographer and set designer Menzies working together, you know it looks great. If you want to see what a vintage live spook show looked like, this has an iron maiden, a decapitation, skull and crossbones, ghosts, a giant hand, and a tied up floating woman. During a show by magician Chartrand The Great (Edmund Lowe), the uncle of Beverly (Lois Moran) is shot and killed. The star's mind reading assistant (Howard Phillips), her long lost brother, is blamed. The title refers to a ring. The Swedish El Brendel (who was really Irish!), Kendall McComas (Breezy in Our Gang shorts) as his wise mouth son, and Ruth Donnelly are comic relief audience members. Cops include Purnell Pratt, Warren Hymer, and a young Ward Bond. With George E. Stone (doctor in the house), Jesse de Vorka (theater owner), and unbilled black stage "slaves" who manage to fool the dumb cops. Menzies' next as director was the better known CHANDU THE MAGICIAN (32), also shot by Howe and starring Lowe.

START CHEERING (Scorched Earth, 38) D Albert S. Rogell, S Eugene Solow, Richard E. Wormser, P Nat Perrin

Major movie star Ted Crosly (Charles Starrett) quits Hollywood to attend Midland College. His manager (Walter Connolly) and his loud womanizing ex con idiot sidekick (Jimmy Durante, the real star) try to have him kicked out, but the corrupt dean (Raymond Walburn) wants to take advantage of his fame to boost football game attendance. Some schemes involve burlesque girls and booze. Meanwhile Ted falls for and sings with the dean's daughter (Joan Perry). Gertrude Niesen plays a co-ed who sings several times and Broderick Crawford is a tough football star. The Stooges do their point to the right routine during football practice and show up as firemen in a sorority house (run by Minerva Urecal). Shorty (Chaz Chase) eats cigarettes, lit matches, a cook book and a Cracker Jack box. Durante sings "The Strutaway" (his new dance craze) twice and befuddles radio star Professor Quiz. Also with Louis Prima (he doesn't sing) and Johnny Green and their orchestras and an all female band. The musical comedy is from

Columbia. The Stooges had also been in MEET THE BARON (33) with Durante. Starrett, a former football star and the hero of MASK OF FU MANCHU (32), was usually in westerns. Rogell also directed the Joe E. Brown drama PAINTED FACES (PV #34).

THEY DRIVE BY NIGHT (Sinister, 39) D Arthur Woods, S Paul Gengello
Shorty (Emlyn Williams) is released from prison then accused of another murder in this very British movie. It deals with non stop rain, lorry drivers, lorry girls, tiny roadside cafes and characters say cor, fags, mate, blimey, bloke, balmy and crackers. A dance hall girl (Anna Konstam) helps him hide out in an old abandoned house. Mr. Hoover (Ernest Thesiger) is an amateur psychologist who offers to help. He hangs out at the local palais, collects girly mags, and keeps a secret scrapbook. If you liked Thesiger in BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN and THE OLD DARK HOUSE, you'll want to see him in this too. Warner/ First National passed on releasing it in America and used the name for a George Raft movie in 1940. Williams (from Wales) was a well known actor, playwright and screenwriter. Woods (from Liverpool) was killed in action during WWII.

365 NIGHTS IN HOLLYWOOD (Englewood, 34) D George Marshall, S William Conselman, Henry Jones, P Sol M. Wurtzel
Curly blonde haired Alice from Peoria (Alice Faye) is conned by a "drama school for suckers" and ends up starring in a very cheap musical film. She also finds herself in a love triangle with the alcoholic "ex boy wonder" director (James Dunn) and a former movie star Clark Gable clone con man (John Bradford). Alice does a Harlow imitation and references are made to Temple, Garbo, Hepburn and DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE. Grant Mitchell is the shameless crook behind the school and the movie. The most notable thing about this (once lost) Fox comedy for me was the acrobatic comedy team of Frank Mitchell and Jack Durant. They play ice delivery men who hit and knock over each other a lot, in a more believable and realistic way than The Three Stooges ever did. The print has some jumps.

TRANSATLANTIC TUNNEL (Englewood, 35) D Maurice Elvey, S Kurt Siodmak
Readers of Forry Ackerman's Famous Monsters all know about this epic sci fi drama, and that it was the remake of the German DER TUNNEL (33). Now the Gaumont British release print (THE TUNNEL) running 94 mins. is easy to find on tape. Engineer Richard McAlan (Richard Dix) neglects his family in London for many years while he realizes his dream project, a tunnel from England to America. He reluctantly agrees to do "cheap publicity" and is blamed when many die (offscreen) during dramatic undersea accidents. McAlan leaves his noble best friend (Leslie Banks) with his wife (Madge Evans), the daughter of the wealthy crippled industrialist backer (C. Aubrey Smith). Much time is spent on personal conflicts and love triangles, and a devious arms dealer plots to take over the project. With some impressive giant sets and miniatures, two way TV sets, a giant radial drill, a futuristic helicopter, and a marijuana reference. Two major prestige actors were guest stars. George Arliss as the prime minister makes a point of wanting to "unite our English speaking nations" and Walter Huston (not long after GABRIEL OVER THE WHITE HOUSE) is the U.S. president. It all ends with "God Save The King." Elvey also directed HIGH TREASON (30) and THE LODGER (32).

TWO GUN MAN FROM HARLEM (Discount, 38) D/S Richard C. Kahn
Herb Jeffries (a handsome popular singer with a great voice) stars as a cowboy framed for murder. He hitches (!) all the way to Harlem where he meets The

Deacon (also Jeffries), a killer gangster/ preacher in a nightclub. He returns to the range impersonating the Deacon and solves the murder. In this musical cowboy mystery, Jeffries sings a cowboy song and there's a vocal group (The Four Tones), a female singer and a dancing one man band in the club. The all star cast includes Mantan Moreland as his cook brother (he tells the story of Lot's wife), Spencer Williams Jr. as Butch, Marguerite Whitten as Sally and Matthew "Stymie" Beard (!) as her little brother. Jeffries and Williams were also both in BRONZE BUCKAROO (38) and HARLEM RIDES THE RANGE (39) both by the same director. The print is dark and jumpy.

VICTIMS OF PASSION (SW, 37) D S. Roy Luby, P Willis Kent
(RACE SUICIDE, WHAT PRICE PASSION?) After a dead manicurist is found in his apartment, Dr. Von Hertsen (Willy Castello) is bailed out of jail and put to work in an illegal office/clinic. A doctor who goes on about "quacks, racketeers, rascals and charlatans" convinces the DA to have "dicks" harass the clinic and organizes a sting operation. The doctor says "It's our duty to the race to protect these women from the results of their own follies." Many ironic plot twists, involving a horrible rich lady, her doomed secretary, blonde daughter, and philandering son, are jammed into the hour long roadshow movie. The payoff scene reveals a naked patient and a lot of time is taken up with the Dead Rat club scenes (a band, an acrobatic dance duo, and a lady singer) from COCAINE FIENDS and silent footage of a fan dancer. Operating table scenes look like they're from horror movies. The print has no credits and one whole scene is repeated.

THE WANDERING JEW (33) D Maurice Elvey, P Julius Hagen
In Jerusalem, Matathias (Conrad Veidt), a wealthy Jew (with a mistress) calls the offscreen Jesus a "Charlatan." Just before being crucified, Jesus speaks (with printed titles) to Matathias who is then condemned to wander Earth for eternity. Loved ones die and he suffers, but as centuries pass he becomes a more perfect soul. In Antioch during the First Crusade, he's a knight with a broken blade and in 13th Century Venice, he's a merchant. Finally, in Seville during the Inquisition (a thinly veiled attack on Nazi Germany), he's a selfless doctor on trial for blasphemy, heresy and being Jewish. He calmly says "Death is life's most glorious opportunity," compares the real cross to ones made of gold and jewels, and tells the religious judges that Christ is closer to his heart than theirs. A heavenly light beams down as he is burned in public on a cross. The impressive Gaumont British production was released in the U.S by Olympic, but was officially condemned by The Catholic Legion Of Decency, keeping it off most screens. It was based on a medieval legend and the play by E. Temple Thurston and had been previously filmed in France (04) by Georges Melies, in Italy (13), and England (23), also by Elvey. He also directed THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES (20), HIGH TREASON (30), THE LODGER (32), and THE TRANSATLANTIC TUNNEL (35). The cast includes Marie Ney (later in SCROOGE and JAMAICA INN), Anne Grey, Francis L. Sullivan, (Sir) Felix Aylmer, (Dame) Peggy Ashcroft (her first role), Jack Livesey, Dennis Hoey (later in American Holmes movies), and Abraham Sofaer.

THE WHISPERING SHADOW (Sinister, 33) D/S Colbert Clark, D Al Herman, S George Morgan, Wyndham Gittens, Howard Bimberg, Barney Sarecky, Norman Hall, P Nat Levine

This is a feature version of a 12 chapter Mascot serial, the first of five serials with Bela Lugosi. The top billed horror star scowls as Prof. Strang, a magician and owner of a wax museum, but despite all the efforts to mislead the Saturday matinee viewers, he turns out not to be the bad guy after all. The Shadow does whisper and is sometimes animated as he slinks around. Hero Jack (Malcolm McGregor, usually in westerns) works for the Empire Transport company. He does stunts on a motorcycle and on top of a truck. The plot concerns the death of Jack's brother and a radio death ray. The helicopter is a model and a prison break

scene is stock footage. A “wax” black servant repeats “Take your hat sir?” over and over. With Viva Tattersall (the real life wife of Sydney Toler) as the daughter Vera Strang (I wonder which of the 6 writers came up with that one), Robert Warwick as a famous detective, D. W. Griffith regular Henry B. Walthall as Jack’s boss, and Karl Dane as the dimwitted Sparks. It was the last role for the tall Copenhagen born silent star Dane (THE BIG PARADE), who spoke little English. He shot himself in ’34.

WOMEN OF ALL NATIONS (31) D Raoul Walsh, S Barry Connors

This is the 3’rd of four features with (British ex-boxer and Boer War vet) Victor McLaglen and Edmond Lowe as the loud Sgt. Flagg and the womanizing conman Quirt. The career Marines fight at Verdun, go to Brooklyn, the Panama Canal, Gotteborg, Sweden, Nicaragua (during an earthquake) and finally Turkey. There’s a comic third soldier (El Brendel) with a sneezing problem and a monkey and a love triangle with a Swedish dancer (Greta Nissen). Prince Hassan (Bela Lugosi) smokes a hookah, makes cat noises, and swears in Hungarian (!?) to Mischa Auer. He wants to castrate the American heroes for messing with his slave girl harem. While parts of this episodic adventure comedy are serious and even grim, the end segment is similar to a Three Stooges short! Also with Fifi D’Orsay (later in NABONGA), Joyce Compton (later in SCARED TO DEATH), little Bernard Gorcey and big black actor Sam Baker (THE LOST CITY) as a eunuch. The impressive WWI battle scenes are from WHAT PRICE GLORY (26), the first Flagg and Quint film. The rare Fox production was originally 95 mins. but was cut to 72 mins. before release, eliminating small roles by both Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne (still visible in the background)! It was recently restored (still at 72 mins) by UCLA. Bela is great in his angry/jealous role (as he was in INTERNATIONAL HOUSE). Lowe was in several 30s films with him.

ZOO IN BUDAPEST (33) D/S Rowland V. Lee, S Dan Totheroh, Louise Long

This unique 20th Century Fox hit which plays like a fairy tale must be one of the first animal rights movies. Naive zoo employee Zani (blonde Gene Raymond) relates to and cares for all the animals. When rich ladies show up in furs, he steals and burns them. The kindly zoo director (O. P. Heggie, the BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN blind man) protects him from complaints and he’s contrasted with a mean worker called Hiney (“the hyena”). When a group of female orphans who are treated like slaves arrive, he encourages Eve (Loretta Young) to escape. Meanwhile a nighttime manhunt is on for a lost child (Wally Albright, the poor little rich kid from OUR GANG). The three almost form a perfect misfit family in a man made paradise, but a tiger attacks an elephant causing a stampede and wild cats run free. Major atmospheric parts resemble a classic silent film. Top cinematographer Lee Garmes’ credits include SCARFACE and NIGHTMARE ALLEY. ZOO is romantic, sexy (Eve changing her clothes in the foggy swamp), exciting (the stampede) and very odd when several animals seem to be near human thanks to visual and audio FX. Lee (SON OF FRANKENSTEIN) had directed two Warner Oland Fu Manchu movies.