

Show Boat

By Phil Hall

When one considers the films of James Whale, the gothic horror classics like “Frankenstein” or “The Old Dark House” inevitably come to mind. But what might be Whale’s ultimate triumph did not involve monsters or chills or Boris Karloff in elaborate make-up. Instead, Whale’s finest achievement came in his least characteristic work: the 1936 film version of the Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein II musical “Show Boat.”

Actually, “Show Boat” was an aberration on many levels. Besides being Whale’s only musical, it was also the rare big budget musical extravaganza for Universal Pictures, a studio that made its bread and butter with horror, Westerns and lowbrow comedy. The film also offered rarities on screen: Irene Dunne in a musical starring role, Allan Jones showing he was capable of acting, and elusive Hollywood performances by Paul Robeson and Helen Morgan. It was also a relatively rare instance of a studio remaking a musical film – Universal produced a part-talkie version of “Show Boat” that was widely viewed as unsatisfactory.

“Show Boat” was the rare film of Hollywood’s Golden Era that dared to show the uglier side of the late 19th century Dixie environment surrounding the Mississippi River communities. Racial segregation, normally a taboo subject for Hollywood, was clearly presented by Whale in “Show Boat.” Scenes where white and black audience members enter and exit the floating theater on parallel gangplanks and move to separate parts of the theater not only spoke of the ugliness of a bygone era, but also reflected the Jim Crow protocol that was still firmly in place in 1936 – and even if white audiences preferred not to acknowledge it, the black audiences of that day could not ignore the circumstances of their second class citizenship. Likewise, the wedding of Irene Dunne’s Magnolia and Allan Jones’ Gaylord is marred (by contemporary standards) by having the show boat’s black crew stand outside of the church and look in at the ceremony, rather than be seated as part of the official wedding celebration. And the main plot twist that drove the story, the miscegenation

CARL LAEMMLE presents
EDNA FERBER'S
"SHOW BOAT"
(Version of 1936)
starring
IRENE DUNNE
ALLAN JONES
with
Charles Winninger · Paul Robeson
Helen Morgan · Helen Westley

BEYOND QUESTION THE GREATEST SHOW-EVENT
OF THE YEAR FOR ALL AGES

THIS 1936 version of Edna Ferber's superb story of the "SHOW BOAT," compared with which every production of its type pales into insignificance, is characterized by GLAMOUR—FASCINATING ROMANCE—BEAUTIFUL, LONG-TO-BE-REMEMBERED NEW MUSIC, new lyrics plus your old favorites, by the masters of melody, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, SCENIC MARVELS and ARTISTS OF RENOWN. We can't enumerate its multitude of attractions. It will be a striking event in all theatres.

A CARL LAEMMLE, JR. production — directed by JAMES WHALE.
IT'S A UNIVERSAL, OF COURSE!

MAY, 1936

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between mixed-race Julie Laverne and her white leading man, broke a major taboo in the rigid Production Code that governed Hollywood’s screenplay.

Many people often refer to this production as the Paul Robeson version. Although billed fourth in the cast, Robeson’s role is very much a supporting part – his character is absent from the film’s final third, when it shifts from the show boat to Chicago and Broadway. Yet Robeson still dominates the film with a subtle mix of sly humor and aching sincerity that elevates his role of Joe from broad caricature to genuine character. (His unilateral decision to find medical aid for Magnolia during a thunderstorm was an uncommonly bold move for a black character in a 1930s film.) And, of course, his rendition of “Ol’ Man River” (shot by Whale with startling close-ups and a

bold expressionist montage of African-Americans in back-breaking menial labor) is pure musical gold – his interpretation of Hammerstein’s lyrical contempt for the racist double standard and the promise of life away from “the white boss” planted the seeds for the black power movement that would blossom three decades later.

If Robeson’s presence resonates with today’s viewer, equal attention deserves to be given to Helen Morgan, now a barely-recalled performer whose bright stardom was derailed by alcoholism. She is primarily recalled today for “Show Boat” and she gives a devastating performance as the actress/singer Julie LaVerne, whose life is ruined when it is revealed by a spurned lover that she is mixed race. Morgan performs two songs, the playful “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man of Mine” and melodramatic “Bill,” and her vocal grace was peerless in plumbing the frivolity of the first number and the anxiety of the latter tune. Her “Show Boat” work is a triumph, but also a tragedy since there would be no further film work to follow that brilliance. (She collapsed on stage from complications related to cirrhosis of the liver and died five years after this film was released.)

From a directing style, Whale took extraordinary visual risks – shooting evening rendezvous songs with the star’s faces in shadows, going for wildly broad comedy via tight close-ups of exaggerated mugging of the film’s comic parts (especially with Helen Westley as the overbearing matriarch Parthy), and bringing a new segment into the film that offered a potentially inflammatory blackface minstrel show song performed by Dunne called “Gallivantin’ Around.” The obvious inappropriateness of the presentation is framed with a tracking shot from the rear of the theater from behind the segregated black audience is watching the number – we don’t see their reactions, but we can only imagine what they are thinking – yet the filmmaker also deserved credit for being honest in showing the type of entertainment offered to audiences in that distant era.

And, of course, there is the Kern-Hammerstein score. Soaring effortlessly between hopeful love songs, ballads of great despair, richly comic inter-

ludes and the revolutionary rejection of the white-imposed status quo of the aforementioned “Ol’ Man River,” the score encompassed the full spectrum of emotional power. Under Whale’s direction, “Show Boat” captures each laugh and heartache created by the score, and then expands it further with a mature yet inventive visual style that frames Hammerstein’s wise lyrics and Kern’s timeless music.

Sadly, the film could not accommodate the full score. However, missing tunes such as “Why Do I Love You?” and “Life Upon the Wicked Stage” lace their way through the film as incidental music.

Perhaps it was a major shame that Whale never made another musical – Universal overextended itself financially with this production and retreated back to its tried-and-true moderate-budget formulas for many years. “Show Boat” would later become an elusive commodity when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) acquired the rights to the property in the 1940s and bought up the prints from Universal. A 1951 MGM version offered a rich Technicolor production, but significantly downplayed the story’s racial drama and brought major changes to other aspects of the score and character presentation. Robeson’s political problems during the McCarthy era further ensured that the 1936 film would remain out of circulation.

Viewed today, the MGM “Show Boat” is a flashy distraction, while the Universal production is uncommonly sophisticated in understanding complex social issues and peerless in serving one of Broadway’s most beloved works to a film audience.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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