

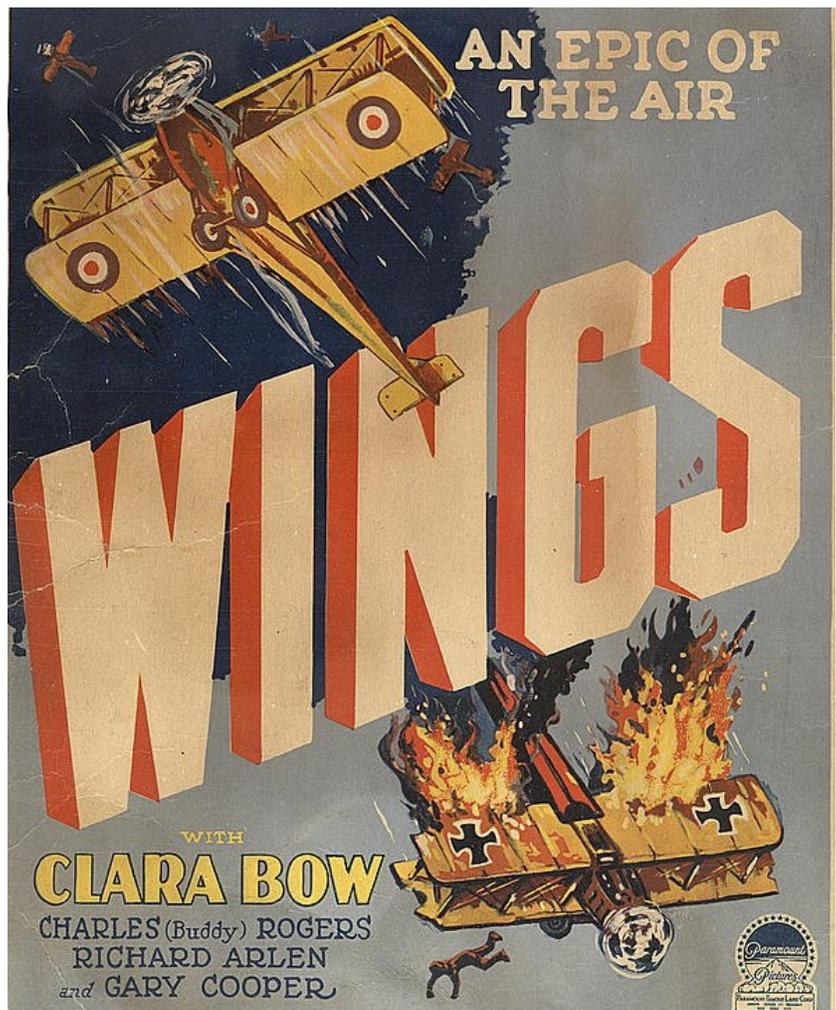
# Wings

By Dino Everett

For many people simply knowing that the film “Wings” (William Wellman, 1927) is the only silent film (from the silent era) to ever win the Academy Award for best picture is enough to warrant any current day interest in it, but the truth is the film still holds interest on many levels. Considering it was made by a cast and crew of twenty some-things, one might be surprised that it wound up a film of any merit, let alone the impressive feature that it is.

Narratively the film is not much beyond a couple of romantic love triangles set against the back drop of World War I. One features the juvenile minded Jack Powell (Charles ‘Buddy’ Rogers) who is under the belief that Sylvia Lewis (Jobyna Ralston) is his girl and when he returns from the war they will marry. This upsets his neighbor Mary Preston (Clara Bow) who secretly has always been in love with Powell. Meanwhile the true romance is between Lewis and David Armstrong (Richard Arlen), but they have both agreed to keep it secret from Powell until after the war since neither has the heart to tell him the truth for fear it will crush him. Throughout the three acts friendships on all sides get tested, someone dies, and someone ultimately gets the girl. Not a bad story, but nothing compared to the impressive nature of some of the other aspects of the film.

The project is listed as a starring vehicle for Clara Bow, but in many ways her part remains secondary to both the male leads, and the war itself. That being said it is still a wonderful example of Bow’s talents as it allows her to express both her dramatic and comedic skills equally and has one of the most memorable scenes of her career. During a point in the war where the soldiers are stationed in France the viewer learns that Preston has also enlisted and now finds herself in the same city as Powell. She decides that if she dresses up pretty, he will no longer see her as a potential little buddy and she will finally catch his eye, but on the particular night in question he has had too much to drink, and she basically babysits him up to the bedroom so he can sleep it off. With Powell fast asleep, she begins changing out of her dress back into her uniform, when two soldiers break in looking for Powell. They briefly catch a topless Bow changing behind a screen. Actor Rogers’ has said of the mo-



Publicity material from the film’s original release. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.

ment, “I saw more of Clara in that scene than I ever saw in real life.”

Directed by what was then the somewhat novice talents of William Wellman, the film ultimately became virtually synonymous with his name, yet he remains one of only a handful of directors responsible for a best picture who were not even nominated for best director. The truth is that because of Wellman’s own military combat experience as a flyer in World War I, he may have been the only person who could have properly handled this film and should have been at least nominated. For it is the handling and photography of the flying combat scenes, that truly sets this film in a category of its own for the time period from which it was made.

One of the most impressive actions by Wellman was his dedication towards getting the aerial scenes to be as realistic as possible, which sometimes meant days without shooting anything. It also meant that the actors needed to learn to fly the planes. For a young director, with not much of a track record this was a

risky move, but in the end it was the correct one, because not only did Wellman insist that the aerial dog-fights had to be shot against a backdrop of clouds, they needed to make some technological improvements to properly shoot them in the first place. The main one being they needed motorized cameras to be mounted on the planes, so that the cameramen (led by Harry Perry) could man the planes flying alongside for long shots, and the actors would turn on the cameras mounted on the front and back of the planes they were flying for close-ups and POV shots. The results were unparalleled for the time.

One of the things that modern audiences may never get to experience is the total extensiveness of special effects employed in the film. For years all versions of the film were missing the special coloring that was used to highlight the fire from the plane crashes, and the bullets being fired from the planes themselves. This coloring was in addition to the tinting that was employed throughout. Also there was a special sound synchronization machine designed by General Electric that was installed in certain theatres to provide the sounds of the machine guns, and the airplanes. Both of these effects have been added digitally to a BluRay release of the film, but no 35mm prints currently exist that contain these two effects.

The most important special feature of "Wings" that has never been recreated was a technique called Magnascope, which would increase the size of the screen and was used for the aerial battle sequences. A standard 15 foot by 20 foot screen would expand out to 25 foot by 40 foot. This required theatres

showing the film to employ a third projector with a special shutter, intermittent and lens configuration that would be used to project only the Magnascope sequences. In addition to "Wings" this procedure was used on another Paramount film "Old Ironsides" (James Cruze, 1926).

A modern viewer is left to only imagine how wondrous it must have been when the masking began to open and the standard sized silent film sequences switched over to such enormous flying sequences employing the special colors and sound effects and the first real widescreen experience. Even with all of that has been restored, watching "Wings" today should be done so knowing that the viewer is still ultimately only getting a portion of what that original experience was since it can only be truly recreated in a proper theatre setting that has restored not just the content of the film, but the original technological context as well.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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