

Review

From Stage to Silent Screen

- Richard Brown

Jon Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918*, University of Exeter Press, 2003. ISBN: 0859897257

Re-visiting Rachael Low is becoming a habit, which is surely a very positive sign of progress in the study of early British film history. But Jon Burrows is not one of those making the journey simply to criticise. His book is refreshingly revisionist, full of new insights, and providing a stimulating and detailed discussion of how theatre stars were used – and perhaps abused – in British cinema between 1908 and 1918. This is a book which is as much of its time as Low's was of hers. Burrows' writing strongly reflects the currently held opinion that it is vital that early cinema be contextualised within the wider field of the social history of popular entertainment if a balanced assessment of it is to be achieved. Consequently questions of 'intermediality' and 'cross-media pollination' are now foregrounded. In fact, if this book were read without its title being known, it might easily appear to be a study of theatrical rather than film history. It is as much methodology as new facts that distances this work from Low in basic assumptions of what film history is.

The author shows how British producers during this period were unwilling to invest money to encourage the development and status of home-grown film stars, but were eager – if not desperate – to attract established theatrical and music hall favourites. This was a conservatism which also included a willingness to pay huge fees for their services. Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree was paid £1,000 by a film company for a mere four hours work, while Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson received £2,000 for agreeing to film his celebrated production of *Hamlet*.

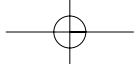
But how effective were these distinguished thespians before the camera? Contemporary

opinion was divided, and it is the theme of acting style which forms a central and recurring focus of Burrows' study. Much of the filmed evidence has of course been 'lost' to use a favourite euphemism adopted by film historians; and Burrows commendably avoids the usual trap of over-analysis of non-existent material, preferring instead to focus on theatrical presentation and the relationship between actor and audience.

Was restraint, or 'reserved force' the true British style, and most importantly could it be captured on film? Perhaps, it was suggested, the inhibited British could learn something from the more demonstrative French or exuberant Italians? Were melodramatic gestures vulgar and old fashioned, or were they absolutely necessary in order to make an impact on the screen? Opinions varied widely. Forbes-Robertson, a notably restrained actor, was criticised for his underplaying in film, while F.R. Benson was equally damned for 'an excess of fidgety gestures'. There was no obvious common ground here, but perhaps it might be found in the area of Edwardian 'character' acting? Burrows thoroughly investigates this possibility in a chapter aptly titled 'Transferable Skills'.

By concluding with a case-history of the Ideal Company, whose artistic policy the author claims 'represents a strikingly ambitious attempt to create a common entertainment culture for a socially heterogeneous audience,' Burrows seeks to bring together a number of the themes raised in his study; in particular 'a redefinition of what high culture was, and how, where, and amongst whom it circulated'. Here the discussion broadens to consider questions of early film audience demographics, a much neglected area of research in early British cinema.

Within its self-imposed limits this is an excellent book. It could have benefited from a slightly wider focus overall which would have permitted a detailed look at the parallel development during this decade of British film stardom. This would have allowed consideration



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of such questions as: did 'manufactured' stars incorporate inappropriate theatrical styles of acting in order to legitimise their work? Or how far did the Hepworth company's interest in pictorial naturalism and the promotion of new film talent influence more reactionary British

producers in their attitudes to both 'theatrical' and 'non-theatrical' methods of acting? Hopefully Jon Burrows' pioneering study will be joined before too long by further complementary research. Rachael Low is sure to have more visitors in the future.

