



FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2020

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

DEANNA DURBIN -- A HUGE STAR THAT NEVER QUITE MADE IT



DEANNA DURBIN COLLECTION I
\$49.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber Studio Classics

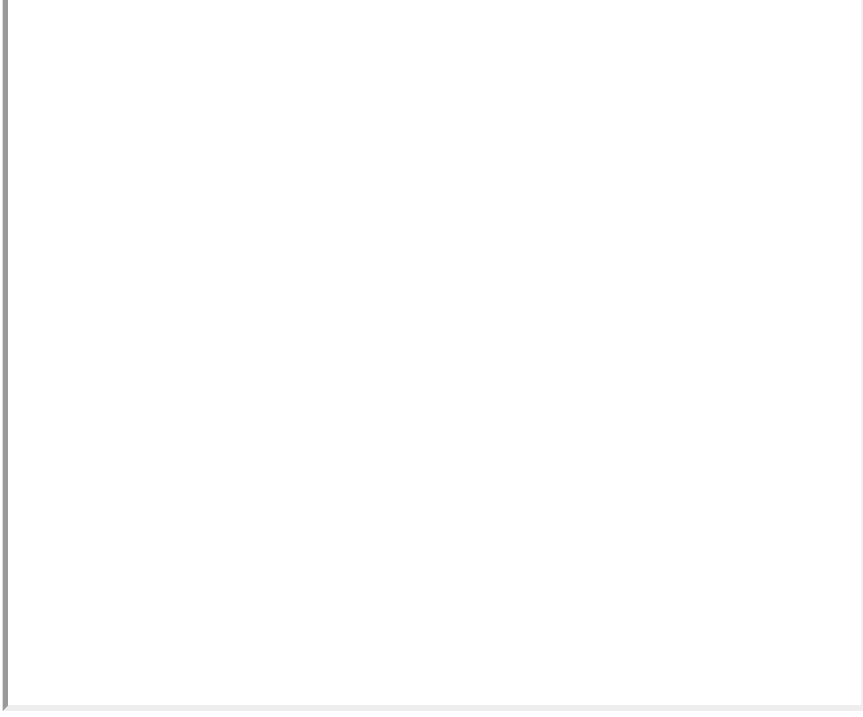
By Michael Giltz

What a talent. What a waste. For a brief period in the 1940s, singer and actress Deanna Durbin was the highest paid actress in the world. Her first two films were nominated for Best Picture and reportedly saved Universal from bankruptcy. Her fan club was the biggest in the world. The Metropolitan Opera came a'calling and offered this lyric soprano the chance to sing for them. Heck, she made her debut in a short opposite Judy Garland and soon eclipsed that artist in almost every way. Almost.

The truth is Durbin never made a great film, a great album or even more than a decent single or two. She easily made the leap from juvenile lead to terrific-looking and talented adult star but to what purpose? Garland demanded the spotlight; Durbin fled from it. After 21 films at Universal, Durbin walked away from it all, married her third husband and never did anything creative again. It worked. Her death in 2013 was certainly noted but as more of a curiosity. Durbin became the answer to a trivia question, one most people would get wrong. Her movies are rarely watched; her recordings rarely listened to, even by those who dimly remember her.

That indifference will probably extend to this odd selection of three films, as random a choice of movies as one could ask for. Durbin made 21 films for Universal and if you were going to showcase just three, surely you'd choose the 3 *Smart Girls* trilogy: the first was her debut and a massive success. Or maybe you'd choose her first three. Or the first three she made with director Henry Koster and producer Joe Pasternak, the men who snapped her up when MGM passed and coached Durbin into stardom. Or all six films she made with Koster. Or something that made a lick of sense.

Instead, this collection includes the SECOND film in the 3 *Smart Girls* trilogy, her SECOND film at Universal (*100 Men and a Girl*) and her LAST film with Koster (*It Started With Eve*), which at least has the distinction of being considered one of Durbin's best. On the bright side, the three prints on this BluRay collection are solid, the sound quality good and to continue the random nature of this endeavor, it features TWO audio commentaries instead of three. You'll also find trailers for all three films, though weirdly none of them are available on YouTube. Here's a clip of Durbin singing the Irish traditional "Danny Boy" to Charles Laughton in *It Started With Eve*.



All three films are this side of good. They contain strong talent, decent scripts and enough smarts to make clear everyone was trying. It's easy to see why they were hits and why no one bothers with them much anymore. In *3 Smart Girls Grow Up*, Durbin must untangle the romantic confusion of her two older sisters. The blonde is marrying a family friend but it's the OTHER sister (a brunette) who really loves him. To console the loser, Durbin dragoons Robert Cummings into falling for the brunette, but he too wants the blonde. Hilarity ensues. In *100 Men and A Girl*, Durbin is the daughter of down on his luck classical musician Adolphe Menjou. They're surrounded by out of work artists (99 of them, to be exact) so naturally Durbin convinces a wealthy producer to back her new orchestra and shames conductor Leopold Stokowski into leading them. *It Started With Eve* cranks up the confusion even more: Cummings (again) is engaged to be married, which is easy to imagine since he's the son of one of the wealthiest men in America (Charles Laughton). When dad is dying and wants only to meet his son's fiancée, Cummings panics when she's not available and grabs a hat check girl (Durbin) to take the woman's place and let dad's last moments go quietly. Needless to say, Laughton recovers, Durbin sees a chance to launch her singing career and despite himself Cummings falls for this inconvenient gal.

Each film is painless and breezy, as long as you're in an undemanding mood. Each features a few moments of real charm and artistry, along with laugh-out-loud nonsense like only old Hollywood can muster. And each film shows Durbin was a real, if squandered talent. My favorite comment on Durbin's career comes from Durbin herself when ending her career: she was tired of being "the highest-paid star with the poorest material." Indeed. It's not that these films are awful; they're just far from what she deserves.

If Universal was going bankrupt until Durbin rescued her, it might have been due to construction costs. Even by the standards of Hollywood, the sets for these three films are bat shit crazy. We're used to Astaire and Rogers dancing across a massive living room floor in a sky-high penthouse. Nonetheless, the home of Stokowski in *100 Men and A Girl* is bonkers. He apparently enjoys an atrium in the middle of his Manhattan home that's so elaborate, an entire 100 piece orchestra can be arrayed on three levels, with Stokowski popping out of his room and steps onto an interior balcony to check out the talent as the orchestra plays. (Indeed, the funniest moment of the film is the twitching in Stokowski's hands when he simply can't resist the desire to conduct.) The home of gazillionaire Lanhgton in *It Started With Eve* is cozy in comparison, even as Durbin shoves a grand piano from one cavernous room to another so she can serenade the old buzzard.

But both are topped by the epic proportions on display in *3 Smart Girls Grow Up*. Their Manhattan home is jaw-dropping in its immensity. And again, this is in comparison to other insanely lavish Hollywood movies, not reality. At one point Durbin must storm out of a room and upstairs in a huff. But the room is so gigantic, the next one so expansive, the stairs so sweeping that Durbin practically sprints so she can get to the landing on the next floor and deliver her final zinger. While she's running, you could head to the concession stand, get popcorn and a soda and head back into the theater without missing a thing. Robert Cummings has the best line in the film. When asked if he had trouble finding their home Cummings admits he did. He walked by twice, Cummings says, because he thought their home was the Museum of Natural History.

Cummings is a good example of the frustrating nature of Durbin's vehicles. He breezes in so naturally in *3 Smart Girls Grow Up*, it's like a breath of fresh air. Durbin is surrounded by talent, even if they are forced to elevate the material rather than getting the script they deserve. Eugene Pallette is his usual, gravelly voiced charmer as a wealthy producer confused as to how he suddenly became the not-so-proud owner of a 100 piece orchestra. Laughton is slumming it in *It Started With Eve*, but he's got marvelous chemistry with Durbin and his hamminess is held in check. Butlers, waiters, cabbies -- these films are filled with strong bit players who make the most of their moments. *It Started With Eve* in particular is a bummer. It's got the bones of a good screwball comedy; they just needed to deliver another draft or two.

And Durbin is a treat. Director Koster and the scripts do one thing right: they slip in the classical bits with ease. In *3 Smart Girls Grow Up*, Durbin is allowed to trill away to annoy her two sisters, delivering the "classy" material with a girl-next-door casualness and a hint of comedy. Again and again, they incorporate her musical moments smoothly or give Durbin some comic bit to deliver physically while singing away. The singing is high class and never mocked, but if they can have Durbin flirt or joke while delivering a number, they do.

Durbin is also a charmer as an actor, enjoying the same onscreen relaxed vibe that turned Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland into all American kids just when America needed them. And unlike so many child actors, Durbin grew up very nicely. Look at the scene in *It Started With Eve* where Laughton is thought to be dying. Durbin barely has a word to say, but her face tells it all: sympathy for a dying man, an immediate chemistry, shame over the trick they're playing on him (well intentioned though it may be) and above all a sweetness and goodness that Laughton immediately grasps and which powers the rest of the film. Best known for her singing, Durbin holds the screen here without saying a word.

If you're one of the vanishing few that remembers Durbin, this random grab bag of movies is presented nicely and with care. If you've never heard of her, you won't discover any gems from Hollywood's golden age. But pay attention and you'll appreciate her talent and wonder what might have been.

POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 11:39 AM  

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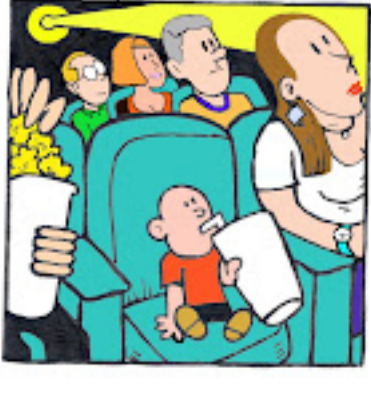
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