

O. Henry's Full House/The Luck of the Irish

Christmas in Connecticut.

No, not the Barbara Stanwyck movie—my childhood. So long ago that nobody had ever heard of climate change, and, in Cole Porter's words, "You can bet all right that your Christmas will be white." Nor had anybody heard of VCR's, much less Blu-Ray, and if you wanted to savor the memories of a great film—or its score—your only tool was a reel-to-reel audio recorder, probably a Wollensak, plugged into your TV's speaker jack. You had to pause out the commercials as best you could, but you were rewarded with the voices of your favorite actors in their iconic roles, supported by such musicians as Max Steiner, Miklos Rozsa, Bernard Herrmann—and Alfred Newman.

The airwaves in this particular season were enriched by NBC's prime-time "Saturday Night at the Movies," a prize package of major 1950's releases from 20th Century Fox, and I was discovering such musical treasures as Herrmann and Newman's *THE EGYPTIAN* and Waxman's *DEMETRIUS AND THE GLADIATORS*. But perhaps nothing made a more emotional impact on me than Newman's straightforwardly melodic main title music for the anthology, *O. HENRY'S FULL HOUSE*. After the traditional Fox Fanfare, there were no rousing opening chords or gestures: the Newman strings simply dove right into a plain, heartfelt, folk-like melody with a distinctly Celtic flavoring, and after its one brief statement the movie was in progress and I was in tears. (Don't ask me why, but this melody speaks to me on a deep level matched by Newman in his main theme from *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY*. I think it is quite simply one of his supreme achievements.) After the film was over, I re-wound the tape, aimed my Wollensak out the window, then rushed outside to savor the New England snow and stars with Mr. Newman's beautiful theme for accompaniment. And, forever after, I came to associate Newman's *O. HENRY* with the joys and sorrows of Christmas. Not because of the holiday subject matter of the majority of the stories so much as

simply the poignance of the music itself.

As for the 1952 film, it took its place on the very short shelf of Hollywood pictures which presented several brief stories instead of a single, feature-length tale. For example, in the preceding decade, the same studio had experimented with *TALES OF MANHATTAN*, featuring an all star cast—typically the key drawing-card in such films—in a series of stories by different writers tracing the life of a formal coat of tails passing from one owner to the next. Back in the early thirties, Paramount Pictures had presented its own stellar line-up to answer the question, what would I do -- *IF I HAD A MILLION*. (The one star common to all three movies was Charles Laughton.) Anthology films were slightly more visible in Great Britain, perhaps most notably in the postwar supernatural shocker *DEAD OF NIGHT*, and it's likely that a pair of recently successful films devoted to the shorter works of Somerset Maugham, *QUARTET* and *TRIO*, got the Fox ball rolling on *O. HENRY*.

By the time the last reel was rolling in the Fox camera, (including interstitial footage of author John Steinbeck introducing the proceedings), *O. Henry*, master of the ironic "twist" ending, was represented by five of his stories, some of which remain famous to this day: *The Cop and the Anthem*, *The Clarion Call*, *The Ransom of Red Chief*, *Gift of the Magi* and *The Last Leaf*. No less than five separate directors—Henry Hathaway, Henry King, Henry Koster, Howard Hawks and Jean Negulesco—had recreated the writer's characters with the luminous personages of, among others, Laughton, Marilyn Monroe, Richard Widmark, David Wayne, Jean Peters, Farley Granger and Jeanne Crain. Following work by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer, screenwriter Nunnally Johnson (*THE GRAPES OF WRATH*) tailored his adaptation of *The Ransom of Red Chief* for the talents of Clifton Webb and William Demarest. Much of his dialogue was used intact, but when Johnson saw how director Howard Hawks had pushed replacements Fred

Allen and Oscar Levant into a more farcical mode, Johnson requested that his name be removed from the credits. The studio went him one better when the sequence failed to amuse critics or audiences by deleting the whole story from the line-up. *Red Chief* remained AWOL from the film until it was restored for NBC's TV broadcast.

The stellar cast of *O. HENRY'S FULL HOUSE* deals audiences an entertaining hand full of drama and comedy filled with memorable moments. And as with so many Fox films, Alfred Newman has to be recognized as one of the leading players. Aply assisted by his close collaborator, vocal director Ken Darby, Newman brings his customary sensitivity to every sequence his music enhances. For this loving recreation of *O. Henry's* world, Newman combined songs and tunes of traditional Americana with several themes that are pure Newman.

This 20th Century Fox extravaganza stands as a tribute to two American masters: To this day, the short stories judged best of their year are awarded a Prize named after *O. Henry*, and, of course, the music recording stage at Fox bears the name, Alfred Newman.

For *THE LUCK OF THE IRISH*, (1948), Newman conducted the score composed by his frequent (and sometimes uncredited) collaborator, Britisher Cyril J. Mockridge. Like David Buttolph and David Raksin during the forties, Mockridge served Fox as a workhorse and jack-of-all-compositions. Although he occasionally got to score projects which went on to become classics—such as *MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET* and *HOW TO MARRY A MILLIONAIRE*—he never wrote a lovelier or more entertaining composition than he gave to *LUCK*, an all-but-forgotten comedy/fantasy, and the music here may just be his masterpiece. I was no longer a child when I first saw this film on TV, but as a young Nutmegger who was on the threshold of going Hollywood, I found it delightfully amusing and frequently, surprisingly touching, in large part due to

one particular performance—but more on that in a moment. If the comments in IMDB are any indication, contemporary audiences are just now starting to rediscover this hidden gem, and that warms the cockles of my heart.

Back in the forties, a husband and wife writing team named Guy and Constance Jones— residents of Connecticut, as a matter of fact—had a run of good fortune with two comic fairy tales, which were both purchased by Hollywood and given the deluxe treatment. At Universal, PEABODY'S MERMAID became MR. PEABODY AND THE MERMAID, starring eponymously William Powell and Ann Blyth, and Fox scooped up THERE WAS A LITTLE MAN, whose title refers to a leprechaun. (During production, the film would be called variously FOR FEAR OF LITTLE MEN—a strange appellation for a light-hearted fable -- and then SHAMROCK TOUCH, before finally emerging as THE LUCK OF THE IRISH.) It's a morality play about the eternal struggle between following your heart or following Mammon, personified in the choices confronting an idealistic young American journalist, Stephen Fitzgerald, tempted away from his finer feelings by the prospect of becoming a flack for a New York politician (and marrying his glamorous daughter) or staying in Ireland where, on a visit, he encounters a sweet young colleen and a genuine leprechaun, both of whom try to steer Stephen back onto the right path.

LUCK shares, in common with O. HENRY, director Henry Koster, co-screenwriter Phillip Dunne, and actress Anne Baxter. Lee J. Cobb and Jayne Meadows portray the politician and his offspring, with the starring role of Stephen going to Fox matinee idol/swashbuckler Tyrone Power. In his autobiography, writer Dunne (HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY) relates how he wrote the part of the Leprechaun with Barry Fitzgerald in mind, and was deeply disappointed when Fox failed to secure the services of the Oscar-winning Irish character actor, beloved as

Bing Crosby's fellow priest in GOING MY WAY. With Fitzgerald portraying the leprechaun, Dunne believed, they would have ended up with a funnier and more successful picture. That's as may be, (or not,) but LUCK benefitted unquestionably and immeasurably from the pixilated presence of Australian-born Cecil Kellaway as the "little man." The leprechaun in the novel was a genuinely small person, but the necessity of casting a normal-sized actor led to one of the wittiest moments in Dunne's script. "Say," says Power, "Aren't you rather large for a leprechaun?" To which a very abashed Kellaway replies, "That's a page of me family history I'd rather we not go into." Kellaway brought to his leprechaun a beautifully quiet, warm human quality which cannot be acted—it can only be there, if a show is lucky, in the actor himself. I think my belief that Kellaway brought something very special and extraordinary to this role was reflected in the fact that his fellow actors in the Academy nominated him for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar, the only nomination for this modest little comedy. (And the fact that Kellaway didn't happen to win the statuette was certainly no shame, considering that this was the year of Walter Huston's historic work in THE TREASURE OF SIERRA MADRE.)

Like BRIGADOON, this fantasy/morality play begins in the Old Country (obviously Ireland, not Scotland, in this case), and then ventures to New York City, before coming home (in every sense of the word) to Erin. Cyril J. Mockridge's music perfectly follows every footstep of the physical and spiritual journey. For the Irish sequences, he calls into play a handful of folk tunes, (the most obviously recognizable of which is "Greensleeves,") and his more romantic passages sometimes call to mind maestro Alfred Newman at his best. (When I first saw the film and heard the score, I sensed such a Celtic kinship between it and HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY—a movie on which in fact Mockridge had assisted Newman—that I couldn't help wondering if conductor

Newman had contributed to the score. A phone call from my little Connecticut town to the 20th Century Fox Music Department led me to none other than Lionel Newman, who kindly looked up the cue sheets and confirmed for me that Mockridge was solely responsible for THE LUCK OF THE IRISH.) With seemingly effortless artistry, Mockridge weaves the disparate elements together. When the mood called for is *mysterioso*, the composer makes sure that the music is not merely spooky but spooky with a definite Irish accent. The love music is tender and lyrical, the jiggling chase music is exciting, invigorating and thrilling.

Dear Reader, I'd wish for you, like the Leprechaun, "all the luck in the world," but you've already got it. This CD is a bucket of gold.

— Preston Neal Jones

Two more classic 20th Century Fox scores have been restored through the magic of digital audio technology. Like many of the studios music masters from the era, "O. Henry's Full House" (1952) and "The Luck of the Irish" (1948) were preserved on 35mm optical elements with separate "close shot" and "long shot" audio perspectives. This allows us, these many decades later, to present this vintage music in full-bodied stereo sound. Emulsion wear was more evident on the "Irish" score than on "Full House," but both have survived intact to bear witness to the talents of Alfred Newman, Lionel Newman, Cyril Mockridge, Ken Darby and Urban Thielmann and the flawless performance of the musicians under their direction.

—Mike Matessino