

Accidents Will Happen

by Emily Soares | December 09, 2008



With a few exceptions, Ronald Reagan's screen image was one of clean-cut, Boy Scout resolve, a fact that no doubt contributed greatly to his success in politics. **Accidents Will Happen** (1938) is one such film for him, in which he plays ambitious claims adjuster Eric Gregg. He uncovers an insurance racket of phony claims, but when his greedy wife (Sheila Bromley) becomes indebted to the villainous gang, Gregg loses his job. Helped by spunky and enamored cigar-stand girl Patty Carmody (played by Joan Blondell's sister, Gloria), Gregg busts the ring and starts life anew, vindicated and partnered with his perfect woman.

Accidents Will Happen was produced by Brian Foy (*House of Wax*, 1953), one of vaudeville's "Seven Little Foy's", who rose through the Hollywood ranks after his beginnings as a gag writer for Buster Keaton. He would become known as "keeper of the Bs" for Warner Bros., churning out potboilers with "ripped-from-the-headlines" plotlines, too gritty for bigger budget pictures. It was to his kingdom that a young Reagan was sent, shortly after his role in the bizarre musical adaptation of the play *Swing Your Lady* (1938) - perhaps as a result.

As in most of his films during this era, Reagan appears as an enthusiastic social reformer, working with authorities to bring the racketeers to justice. Produced during a time when insurance scams ran rampant in daily newspaper stories, the subject matter was pure Foy. Interestingly, though, according to Stephen Vaughn's *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, the film's storyline might also have been influenced by realities at Warner Bros. at that time. "In 1938 the studio had turned to insurance companies for financial backing. Small wonder that this picture....warned audiences against such fraud."

Whatever the story's inspiration, for censors, it was a little too realistic. Since the Production Code Administration (PCA) believed that illegal activity in a film would likely be mimicked by real-life criminals, restrictions about what type of crimes could be shown and how the criminals themselves could be represented were severe; for example, criminals could never be depicted as role models in a film. Arson, which Gregg investigates early in the picture, was considered too dangerous to ever be the main theme of a film. As a result, Jack Warner was warned to clearly distinguish between racketeers and legal loan companies to limit objections from the latter.

Reportedly, Reagan dealt with the frustration of his B-movie tenure by enjoying the off-screen company of his leading ladies. Sheila Bromley, the greedy and conniving Mrs. Gregg, was one actress Reagan would have enjoyed dating, but to no avail.

Gloria Blondell, Reagan's wholesome love interest in the film, did not experience the same high profile career her sister Joan enjoyed. She was the first wife of producer Albert R. Broccoli and, reportedly, the first choice for the role of Blondie Bumstead when the Blondie and Dagwood comic strip came to film in 1938, a part which eventually went to Penny Singleton.

Accidents Will Happen was successful enough to boost Reagan back into the A ranks, at least temporarily, for *Cowboy from Brooklyn* (1938), with Dick Powell and Pat O'Brien. But he would return to work seven more times with Foy, their last film together being *The Winning Team* (1952), in which he co-stars with Doris Day. In between these "B-keeper" projects, Reagan made some of his best known films, *Knute Rockne All American* (1940) and *Kings Row* (1942).

Director: William Clemens
Screenplay: Anthony Coldeway (screenplay), George Bricker (story and screenplay); Morton Grant (uncredited screenplay); Victor Rose (uncredited contributor to treatment)
Cinematography: L. Wm. O'Connell
Art Direction: Charles Novi
Music: Howard Jackson (uncredited)
Film Editing: Thomas Pratt
Cast: Ronald Reagan (Eric Gregg), Gloria Blondell (Patricia 'Pat'/'Patty' Carmody), Dick Purcell (Jim Faber), Sheila Bromley (Nona Gregg), Addison Richards (Blair Thurston), Hugh O'Connell (John J. 'J.J.' Oldham), Ellen Clancy (Mary Tarlton, Gregg's secretary), Elliott Sullivan (Burley Thorne), Anderson Lawlor (F.R. Dawson), Spec O'Donnell ('Specs' Carter).
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