These three giants of the silent cinema—men who had found the successful formula of combining artistry with boxoffice, who made films that were "big" in every sense of the word—somehow never quite made it back to the top in sound films. They of course were not the only ones; E.A. DuPont is the most spectacular example of a complete and utter collapse of a once-great talent. Directors like William Beaudine and Reginald Barker seemed content to exist on a diet of competent "B" pictures. Crosland, Cruze and Brenon, at least, were never really "has-beens", and in the cases of Cruze and Brenon in particular, after indifferent pictures they’d somehow always spring back with a good one that showed they could still do it. Our program tonight is of course no attempt to cover their sound careers, but merely to show interesting highlights from them.

"SILVER LINING" (Excerpt) (Patrician Pictures, 1931) 6 reels; directed and produced by Alan Crosland; starring Betty Compson, John Warburton, Maureen O’Sullivan, Montague Love, Walfred Lucas, Cornelius Keefe. Produced under the title "Thirty Days"; reissued as "Girls of the Big House".

Crosland’s career dates back to 1912 with Edison, and reached its apex in the middle and late twenties with such expertly made films as "The Jazz Singer", "Don Juan", "When a Man Loves" and "Beloved Rogue". He was one of Barrymore’s favorite directors, and had a lush, colorful and vivid style that matched Barrymore’s personality (and his roles of that period) perfectly. That Crosland was not stymied or confused by the coming of sound is amply proven by "Viennese Nights", one of the very best of the early talkie musicals, and one which didn’t sacrifice one iota of style because of the restrictive sound techniques which seemed to land so many lesser directors in a mire of static, stagey takes. Yet something happened to Crosland; for him to make a comparatively minor film like this only a year after doing "Viennese Nights", is the equivalent of David Lean turning up today on a minor Norman Wisdom vehicle. One can only assume that he was driven by the same motives that prompted Vidor to make "Our Daily Bread". Like so many films of slum conditions in the early thirties, "Silver Lining" is sincerely motivated, but falls apart on its fantastic storyline and obvious melodramatics. However, the story of "Silver Lining" does not concern us too much in this program; we are merely showing the opening sequence which demonstrates, quite plainly, that Crosland still had a considerable talent for visuals, strong dramatic images and smooth moving camerawork.

"SHE GOT WHAT SHE WANTED" (Tiffany, 1930); 9 reels; produced and directed by James Cruze, released through Tiffany; based on the play by George Rosener; screen adaptation by Rosener; starring Lee Tracy, Betty Compson, Alan Hale, Gaston Glass, Fred Kelsey.

After years as one of the top directors in the business (even though some of his biggest hits, such as "Old Ironsides" and "The Covered Wagon", don’t stand up too well today), Cruze’s decline in the early years of sound was quite sadening. He seemed unfamiliar with and unsympathetic to the talking film, and most of the films that he produced for his own company had an apathetic air to them, as though he had given up trying to adjust his old ideas, and was stumbling along blindly in the hopes of an accidental inspiration. Later on,
happily, there was a renaissance in such films as "I Cover the Waterfront", "Washington Merry-go-round" and "Sutter's Gold". The latter, a large-scale epic, cost a small fortune, proved to have little boxoffice pull, and all but wrecked Universal. Luckily, James Whale's "Showboat" was doing fantastically good business at the same time. Huge and almost silent in technique, using many titles, it was nevertheless a most interesting film, certainly a better one than the more favorably received but extremely slow and ponderous "Wells Fargo", a Frank Lloyd epic of the same period. "Sutter's Gold" finished Cruze as a "big" director, and his last films were a number of extremely good "B" melodramas for Republic.

"She Got What She Wanted" is one of the better pictures from Cruze's early talkie period, and starts off, intriguingly, by completely fooling the spectator. One's initial impression that it is badly outdated and overacted melodrama that one cannot take seriously soon bounces back when one realises that it is not meant to be taken seriously. This unexpected shock reaction gives the film unusual momentum, and it runs its bizarre little comedy course quite successfully from then on. A marital comedy-drama in which a European emigrant (Compston) successively is married to a store-keeper, a roughneck, and a fast-talking con man, and then winds up happily with her first husband, it makes no attempt to hide its stage origin or its end-of-act curtains. Apart from a brief exterior half-way through the film, and the climactic sequence, everything takes place in an interior set. Since the writing (George Rosener — mainly a writer of westerns and serials, and also a character actor) is hardly of outstanding quality, it is the playing and direction that really carry it. For a story of such limited movement — and a story which telegraphs all its punches at that — it remains surprisingly lively. If members should show any real interest in seeing this feature in its entirety, we'd be glad to schedule it for a future program; although it must be admitted that it is a curiosity piece mainly, of little interest except to students of Cruze and the early talkie period.

"I COVER THE WATERFRONT" (U.A., 1933) An Edward Small-Reliance Production, directed by James Cruze; script by Wells Root, from the book of the same name by Max Miller; photographed by Ray June; edited by Grant Whynott; Assist. Direct. Vernon Keays. 8 reels.

Starring BEN LYON, CLAUDETTE COLBERT and ERNEST TORRENCE, with Hobart Cavanaugh, Maurice Black, Purnell Pratt, Harry Beresford, George Humbert, Rosita Marsini, Claudia Copley, Wilfrid Lucas, Al Hill.

Skirting the established groups of standardised gangster and detective thrillers in 1933, were many "off-beat" melodramas which, though dealing with the accepted racket—bootlegging, dope peddling, smuggling, gambling (e.g., an early Cary Grant thriller, "Gambling Ship") — managed to avoid uniformity and still retain the pace and punch so typical of the melodramas of that period. "I COVER THE WATERFRONT", with its sub-themes of the smuggling of aliens and the disregard for prohibition laws, and its cynical approach to the newspaper game, is one of the best films of its type, and restored Cruze to some of his former glory. Apart from a well-staged shark hunting sequence, there is little physical action — certainly no roaring car chases or gun battles — and yet it has a tremendous, gutsy vigor, that is sustained until the very last sequence. Finished just before the new Production Code rulings came into force, it had some quite startling ingredients that, even a year later, would have been toned down completely. The hard-boiled, peppy dialogue is a delight, and although sex is a minor factor in the plot, the script makes no bones about allowing the hero and heroine to spend a night together long before matrimony is contemplated. The only obvious concession made is that prior to, and following, a particularly rowdy bordello session, the establishment is referred to as (a) a boarding house, and (b) a speakeasy! Episodes like this were among the first to be hacked when the film went on television. Our
print is in good shape and quite complete, save for the elimination of Ernest Torrence from the credits. Presumably this was done to cover up the film's age on reissue (Torrence had died shortly after the film's completion). Torrence, as always, wraps the film up quite effortlessly, but Ben Lyon — one of the most pleasant (and over-worked) heroes of the early thirties — runs him a close second. Incidentally, the film's theme music remains as pleasing and tunefully sentimental now as it was in 1933.

- Intermission -

"THE HOUSEMASTER" (Associated British Picture Corp., 1939) Released in the U.S. by Alliance; directed by Herbert Brenon; from the story by Ian Hay; scenario by Dudley Leslie and Elizabeth Meenan; photographed by Otto Kanturek; settings by Cedric Dawe; edited by Flora Newton; production supervisor, Walter C. Mycroft; 8 reels. Starring OTTO KRUGER, with Diana Churchill, Phillips Holmes, Rene Ray, Joyce Barbour, Kynaston Reeves, Walter Hudd, Cecil Parker, John Wood, Henry Hepworth, Rosamund Barver, Michael Shepley, Laurence Kitchin, Jimmy Hanley.

Although Herbert Brenon had started out with historical spectacle ("Ivanhoe") and Annette Kellerman extravaganzas, and was to achieve considerable success with such diversified subjects as Pola Negri's "The Spanish Dancer" (due for early presentation at this society), "Beau Geste", Chaney's "Laugh Clown Laugh" and the Clara Bow opus "Dancing Mothers", he seemed most at home with sensitive and quiet adaptations from plays and books of an unspectacular nature and usually British origin. The two Barrie adaptations, "Peter Pan" & "A Kiss for Cinderella" are outstanding examples; Warwick Deeping's "Sorrell & Son" another. With the exception of "The Case of Sergeant Grischa", Brenon never quite seemed to hit his stride again in the early thirties, and was saddled with some unappetising material — with which, however, he did his best. Then, in 1935, Brenon left for England to make a group of films for B.I.P. and Associated British; films that he was to direct, and in some cases write. With the exception of the last of the group (1940's competent but unremarkable "The Flying Squad", an Edgar Wallace melodrama) they were all admirably suited to his particular talents. "The Dominant Sex" was a good one; "Yellow Sands" was another that would repay reviewing, and perhaps best of all was "The Housemaster".

Author Ian Hay and Herbert Brenon make an admirable team. Hay's forte has been primarily light farce ("The Middle Watch"), and his more serious essays have never been too serious. There has always been a great deal of humanity, and, if you like, troth — even whimsy — in Hay's writings. Having tackled Barrie so successfully, Brenon translated Hay to the screen more successfully than had been done before — or since.

Not that "The Housemaster" is a great film; I doubt if any great, or even important, work could be made from any Hay story. But it is a warm and human story, and one with a great deal of truth in it. The faults of the film are also those of Hay: one longs for the potentially dramatic strength to crystallise into some really powerful scenes. And once in a while the power comes through. But too often it is dispelled by subsequent flippancies; and it takes rather too long for the dramatic conflicts to get under way. But Brenon was ever a faithful respecter of the values of the original, and if that was the way Hay wrote it, that was the way he would film it. Many episodes are genuinely moving; particularly Kruger's farewell to his boys — a quite beautifully underplayed, simply directed, and sincerely written scene. The classroom episodes are quite fine too, and much of the acting — particularly that of Kruger, and Kynaston Reeves as the headmaster — outstanding. Phillips Holmes has surprisingly little to do, but plays his big scene (his discovery of his own authority in the classroom) extremely well. Our print, with rather more splices than we would like, is quite complete, and in reasonably good condition.

Wm. K. Everson