The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

August 25, 1959

THE HORROR FILM: Program One - The Old School.

"THE CAT AND THE CANARY" (Universal, 1927) 7 reels Director: Paul Leni
Adapted by Robert F. Hill and Alfreda Cohn from the play by John Willard; photographed by Gilbert Warrenton.
The Cast: Annabelle West (Laura Le Plante); Paul Jones (Creighton Hale) Charles Wilder (Forrest Stanley) Roger Crosby (Tully Marshall) Cecily (Gertrude Astor) Susan (Flora Finch) Harry (Arthur Edmund Carewe) Mammy Pleasant (Martha Mattox) Hendricks (George Siegmann) The Doctor (Lucien Littlefield) Milkman (Joe Murphy) Taxi driver (Billy Engle)

"The Cat and the Canary" was made in a period when Carl Laemmle was filling his studio with imported, and predominantly German, talent. It was handed to Paul Leni as his first American assignment, following years in Germany as a set designer ("Variety", "Manon Lescaut") and as a director ("Waxworks").

Universal has always been Hollywood's stronghold of horror movies. Even though their "Golden Age" was between 1929 and 1934, the studio still maintains the tradition, somewhat superficially it must be admitted, in such current films as "Monster on the Campus". Thus it is no surprise that "The Cat and the Canary" is so slickly done. One of what we may loosely term the "old house" school of thrillers, its action is restricted and its effect is dependent more upon atmosphere than upon sensationalism. It was a type of horror film that was better suited to the more methodically paced silent film than it was to the talkies. Like THE BAT and THE GORILLA (which were also made once as a silent, remade twice as talkies) it was a stage derivation, and one with a marked comedy content, but it remains thrilling and gripping fare for all that.

If the script is thoroughly American, then the handling of it certainly shows the influence of Leni's German background. The lighting and camerawork throughout have been patterned after that of "Warning Shadows" and other classic German fantasies of the early 20's. The impressionistic opening after the main titles is still one of the most effective establishing sequences ever put on film; and the imagery of the clock striking prior to the reading of the will is a telling piece of cinema. The Germanic influence is further in evidence in the character of the doctor, played by Lucien Littlefield. His makeup is a startling and obvious composite of Dr. Caligari and Murnau's Dracula. And "The Cat and the Canary" was by no means without influence itself, especially in the early 30's. The wonderful moving camera shots down deserted corridors and past billowing drapes were duplicated many times, most specifically in "The 13th Guest" (with a very similar plot) and James Whale's "The Old Dark House" -- this latter one of Universal's best sound horror films.

It must be admitted that the film doesn't survive the years quite as well as the earlier German films whose style it resembles. This is not so much due to any defects in the film itself as to the fact that the film is really a "blueprint" of its species. The format has been repeated so many times since, the sliding panels and clutching hands (later abetted by the inevitable scared negro manservant a la Willie Best) degenerating through the years into such limp and casual cliches, that the original doesn't now have quite the punch that it had in 1927. "Warning Shadows" and the other German films of its period may have had a great deal of influence (i.e., Universal's 1932 "Murders in the Rue Morgue" was quite carefully patterned after much of "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari") but there was little outright imitation, and none at all outside of their own era. Thus there was no time for familiarity and degeneration to set in, and the films, on their own merits, remain as effective as ever. "The Cat and the Canary", succeeded by over 30 years of not only straightforward imitations, but also many lampoons at the hands of
Bob Hope, Abbott and Costello, Martin & Lewis, Brown and Carney and others, is at a distinct disadvantage. A possible minor flaw too, is the lack of strong personalities in the principal leads. It is the supporting players - Siegmund, Tully Marshall, Lucien Littlefield - who attract all the attention, both by their performances and by their part in the sinister proceedings. Beautiful Laura La Plante is as appealing as ever as the heroine, but her lively sense of fun is not utilised, and she serves no purpose other than being the pivot around which the mystery revolves. And Creighton Hale as the bumbling, slightly oafish but good-natured hero seems to be a victim of too literal type-casting, merely repeating the performances he gave under Griffith in "Way Down East" and "Orphans of the Storm". It is those Griffith and Stroheim reliables - Siegmund and Marshall, who piller all the scenes in which they appear. (One of the reasons for the continued punch of "The Old Dark House" is its strong cast of top-notch players - Karloff, Laughton, Douglas, Massey, Thesiger. With stronger lead players, "The Cat and the Canary" might stand the time test a little better. Not that it needs any kind of apology. It is still a fascinating, important and thoroughly cinematic film; we make the above qualifying statements only to stress that the cards have been rather stacked against it through the years.

"Cat" has been remade twice: once by Universal in 1930, as "The Cat Creeps", with Rupert Julian directing and Neil Hamilton and Helen Twelvetrees starring; and again by Paramount in 1939, with Elliot Nugent directing Bob Hope, Paulette Goddard, Douglass Montgomery and George Zucco. Although made by a different company, this last version also showed signs of having been carefully patterned after Leni's original, with many shots duplicated in detail.

In addition to the players already mentioned, it is worth calling attention to Arthur Edmund Carewe, whose striking and sinister face made him a natural for horror subjects (usually as a red herring) in the 20's & 30's - among them Chaney's "Phantom of the Opera" and one of the very best of the early sound chillers, "Mystery of the Wax Museum". Also seen in a minor role at the end is Joe Murphy, once the Andy Gump of earlier silent comedies. The striking and atmospheric camerawork is that of Gilbert Warrenton, later to become one of the most prolific photographers of "B" westerns, and still very active doing television series and cheap quickies for American International.

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**INTERMISSION**

"WHITE ZOMBIE" (United Artists, 1932) 7 reels; directed by Victor Halperin; produced by Edward Halperin; photographed by Arthur Martinelli; settings by Carl Traftschler, Ralph Berger, Howard Anderson; musical arrangement by Abe Meyer; edited by Harold McLernon; Asst. Directors: William Cody, Herbert Glazer.

With MGM, Warners and Paramount following Universal's lead in the great Grand Guignol cycle of the early 30's, it was only natural that the independents would try to clamber aboard such a profitable band-wagon too. Most of the results however were mediocre; companies like Tiffany, Majestic and Mascot just couldn't compete. At best, we had a reasonably interesting film like "The Vampire Bat"; at worst, a laughable farce such as "The Monster Walked". Only one entry from the independent market successfully matched the efforts of the majors - and that film was "White Zombie". (But the Halperins couldn't pull the trick off again; a follow-up, "Revolt of the Zombies", was dull and tiresome, its only
moments of interest being a few stock shots repeated from the earlier film).

"White Zombie" admittedly tries a little too hard to horrify; and the zombies themselves, just too nightmarish to be taken seriously, don't pay off half as well as the less obvious elements. And due to Lugosi's wonderfully effective but - to be honest, hammy - performance, poor acting from Madge Bellamy and Johnny Harron (Bobby's brother), and irritating little bits of business (Joseph Cawthorne's "comedy" for example) designed as relief from all the horror, the film does date rather more than most of its period. This dating seems all the more apparent because of a rather poor sound-track with a great deal of surface noise.

But compared with the good things that the film offers, these are picayune points. It has a wonderfully visual, Gothic style throughout: beautiful compositions, fine images of terror (the zombies silhouetted against the night sky, the framing of faces and figures in windows and through stairways) and an expert combining of sound and image - as in the sugar mill sequence, and in the grim burial sequence, almost silent but for the harsh scraping of coffin wood against flagstone. Although Lugosi has some magnificently melodramatic dialogue, it is essentially a silent film. There are long passages where hardly a word is spoken; and while the dialogue itself is often a joy, one could delete it all and still have a perfectly comprehensible movie; in fact while the film was in production the Halperins announced that they were trying to get away from the "100% all-talkie" course by making a film with only 15% of its running time taken up by dialogue.

The musical score of the film consists mainly of wonderful old mysteriosos and agitatos, many of them used in other films of the early 30's, but never more effectively than here. There is also an exceedingly interesting use made of the split-screen, accompanied by the humming of a native spiritual.

Like "The Bride of Frankenstein" and "The Mystery of the Wax Museum" - and of course, "The Mummy" -- "White Zombie" warrants respect and attention as a piece of film-making, quite transcending the more limited boundaries of the horror film per se.

A note about the prints:

"THE CAT AND THE CANARY" has a curious history. This print is one that I first played at my film society in London back in 1945. In later years, another collector managed to bring it over to America, whereupon I re-acquired it. But in the interim a number of key scenes had either been lifted or destroyed. These were then replaced by making dupes from an American print, and inserting these sections into the British print. It is now relatively complete, except for one or two comedy scenes with Creighton Hale which frankly one doesn't miss. There are some rather sudden splices here and there, with odd frames out, but no scenes or sequences other than the Hale footage referred to above, are missing. Of course there is a qualitative difference when the duped footage comes on.

"WHITE ZOMBIE" is a brand new print made from a negative that was already beginning to fade. The sound always WAS bad; and the battered negative didn't help it. In a small room with imperfect acoustics, it may not always come through well - so it'll be helped by a maximum of quiet from the audience. The print itself is complete except for one brief scene - Madge Bellamy standing in her lingerie. Possibly this scene was cut because it was considered censorable for TV; or perhaps just because audiences always laughed at it. Anyway the print is otherwise complete and in fine shape.

Program notes & enquiries: Wm.K.Everson, Hotel Bradford, 210 W, 70th St., NYC 23

Next show - Next Friday, same time, same place - TERROR BY SUGGESTION - Tourneur's CAT PEOPLE and excerpts from some half-dozen other movies.