St. Clair and Seiter turned out some of the most silken and charming of comedies in the mid and late twenties; St. Clair such delights are "Are Parents People?" and "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter"; Seiter some of the best Reginald Denny films, including "Skinner's Dress Suit". Tonight's program however, is devoted to the period just before they became established as comedy directors, but when they were already bringing their marked gentle touch to melodramatic subjects.

"THE WHITE SIN" (Palmer Photoplays-FBO, 1924) Dir: William A. Seiter; Screenplay by Harold Schumate; continuity by Julian La Mothe and Del Andrews; 6 reels
Starring Madge Bellamy, with John Bowers, Hallam Gooley, Francelia Billington, Myrtle Vane, Billy Bevan, James Corrigan, Ethel Wales, Otis Harlan

A sort of poor man's "Way Down East" and Ladies' Home Journal novelette rolled into one, "The White Sin" is an extremely enjoyable little "bread-and-butter" romance, supremely unimportant in the history of the cinema, but neatly photographed and directed, and with some good performances. Like so many films of the period with similarly explosive titles, it is actually quite a gentle film, and is well served by William Seiter, who certainly sets the very most out of his material, and by an uncredited title-writer who seems at times to have learned quite a lot from Bill Hart and Lambert Hillyer.

Independently made for FBO release, it is obviously cheaper than most FBO pictures, yet by the use of standing sets and an occasional stock shot, it hides its economy rather nicely. The old Ince studio (which has served as innumerable Southern mansions as well as the Selznick trademark) here does duty as a Long Island estate. When the estate has to burn down for the climax, they manage a nice illusion by putting a couple of smoke pots inside Mr. Ince's front door, and then cutting to model shots. Then a title tells us that the estate has been restored, and we're treated to another shot of the studio front! Further economy may be noted in the cast itself, in which some fairly respectable names appear. But their parts are brief, and quite obviously players like Ethel Wales and Otis Harlan were just hired for half a day, and paid accordingly. Even hero John Bowers doesn't make his entrance until well into the second half. Madge Bellamy does very well as the heroine, is well photographed, and has some quite touching scenes.

Seiter (whose "Little Church Around the Corner" we ran a year or so ago) was a most accomplished director who never really hit the big time, but never lost his touch either. Even into the fifties he was turning out exceptionally enjoyable programmers for Republic, "The Lady Wants Mink" and "Champ for a Day" being two really first-rate latter-day Seiters that didn't get the reception or the distribution that they deserved.

- INTERMISSION -

"LIGHTHOUSE BY THE SEA" (Warner Bros., 1924) Dir: Malcolm St. Clair; from a story by Owen Davis; scenario by Darryl F. Zanuck; camera - Lyman Groening; edited by Howard Bretherton; Art Directors, Lewis Geib and Eadnas Hartley; Electrical Effects by F.N. Murphy; Asst. Directors, Clarence Bricker and Clarence Kolster; art titles by Victor Vance. 5 reels.


Interestingly enough, although Rinty has some of his best sequences in this
robust little thriller -- rescuing a blind man who is about to topple off a cliff, putting a vicious bulldog to flight, heroically, not to say intently, re-lighting the sabotaged lighthouse -- it seems far less of a vehicle than most of his other films. One could delete Rinty entirely from the plot, and still be left with a serviceable tale of smugglers and coast-guardsmen. Too, it is exceptionally fine pictorially. Some of the seascapes and silhouette lighting effects are quite stunning, as are the scenes, early in the film, where the heroine visits a seashore tavern -- with the surf pounding out of the night just behind her. However, despite the above-average care in pictorial and dramatic trimmings, it's still Rinty's show all the way. He acts like a truant, leaps like a stunt man, and sagely studies every situation to size it up before he propels himself into action. And since William Collier Jr -- always a rather weak-kneed hero -- never seems very able to take care of himself, Rinty really has to work overtime in this one.

The pacing is fast, and in fact the climax itself seems to occupy about half the picture! The editing is neat and extracts the maximum of suspense from any given situation; surprisingly, the editor was Howard Bretherton, who never managed to duplicate this excitement when he himself was promoted to a director of later Rinty pictures. (In sound films, he concentrated mainly on westerns, but never generated the excitement that Lesley Selander, Lambert Hillyer, Ray Taylor or John English did). Zanuck's screenplay certainly keeps on the move far more than some of his more recent epics have. Legend has it that at script conferences on the Rin Tin Tins, Jack Warner would frequently interrupt a recital of the story-line to ask what the dog was doing at this point -- and Zanuck, on all fours, barking and woofing, would demonstrate. Whether it's true or not is another matter, but one would like to believe it!

Incidentally, American lighthouses -- judging from films like this and "Captain January" -- seem to be manned solely by senile old men who are often completely blind! However sympathetic they may be personally, one does rather wonder at times why Hollywood hasn't afforded the lighthouse-keeper the same kind of respect meted out to air mail pioneers or pony express riders! (In British movies, lighthouse keepers were never blind -- but they were usually mad, with the bodies of their murdered wives stuffed away in the cellar!)

St. Clair didn't have the same success in talkies that Seiter did, but he remained active none-the-less, and turned out some good movies. His last films ironically were made under Zanuck -- "P" comedies for the Sol Wurtzel unit -- and darned good little pictures they were too, especially one called "Arthur Takes Over".

We had expected to play Lupino Lane's GOOD NIGHT NURSE this evening, but by an extraordinary coincidence it was booked by a San Diego society -- for tonight. Cinema 16, who were very kindly loaning us the print, had to honor the prior booking. So GOOD NIGHT NURSE has been put back to one of our July programs. In its place, we've turned to our old reliables -- LAUREL & HARDY (and Charlie Hall). The film is THE MIDNIGHT PATROL, 1935, MGM--Hal Roach, directed by Lloyd French, and it will be closing our show tonight. An off-beat LAH, with the boys as ineffectual cops, it has better dialogue than most of their early talkies, plus plenty of the traditional and really wild slapstick.