If tonight's bill represents something of an extreme in incongruous program building, we can at least offer the counter attraction of equally extreme variety. The print of Dieterle's "Fashions of 1934" became available suddenly and temporarily; at last Friday night's Film Group meeting, the enthusiasm shown for it was so great that it seemed a crime to let it slip through our fingers without a screening. So we've added Busby Berkeley to the heavier offerings from Renoir and Robison, and, to prevent too exhausting a show, have dropped the Will Rogers two-reeler for the time being. This we'll add to one of our upcoming shows.

A word of thanks to Major George J. Mitchell for taking the trouble to bring along his 9.5 mm projector and screen for us the 9.5 prints of THE INFORMER and THE TOURNAMENT. 9.5 mm offers fine picture quality, often equal to 16mm, and thanks to a single sprocket hole in the centre, the picture area is far larger than one might expect, and of course vastly superior to the fuzzy, amateurish and frustrating quality one gets from 8mm. These British 9.5mm prints, though drastically condensed, are intelligently condensed; if one can't have the original, these are a first-class substitute.

Since, without 9.5 equipment ourselves, we were unable to study these prints carefully ahead of tonight's showing, it has not been possible to arrange careful musical scores. The music will have to be completely ad-lib, based on the memory of one screening, and we hope you'll bear with us if a little Liszt creeps in where Max Steiner would be more appropriate!

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LE TOURNOI DANS LA CITE (THE TOURNAMENT) Prodiced by La Societe des Films Historiques and Jean de Merly; written and directed by Jean Renoir; released in 1929

Francois de Baynes (Aldo Nadi); Isabelle Ginord (Jackie Monnier); Henri de Rogier (Enrique de Rivero); Catherine de Medici (Blanche Bernis); Comtesse de Baynes (Suzanne Desprats)

Renoir is one of those curious directors who is always making interesting films, rarely makes great ones, and seems best remembered for works like "La Regle du Jeu" which seem singularly dull and pointless, and have hidden depths that only the elite among film writers seem sufficiently blessed to plumb. Naturally, "The Tournament", which is conspicuously unknown, has been studiously avoided by the reference books, and casually dismissed by the historians who deign to notice it as "a commercial work" (implying that if not obscene, it is certainly reprehensible), is one of his more interesting works, and one longs to see a complete print with the richness of style, setting and photography that this condensation suggests. It is based on a scenario by Dupuis-Maquel, who specialised in historical intrigues that were usually more literary than filmic. Its plot is set in the year 1562, when Charles IX, a mere boy, was a figurehead King of France while the real power behind the throne was his scheming mother Catherine. It was a period of tension between Catholics and Protestants, a period that also formed the background to the French story of "Intolerance". Pictorially, the film is superb, full of fine rich images and striking compositions, many of them quite obviously influenced by the paintings of old Flemish masters. Too, the film was shot in the Chateaux district of the Loire amidst actual locations of the story; the castles are the real thing rather than studio sets, and costuming and props all appear quite authentic. Despite the trimming, the final tournament sequence -- excitingly done, and as good as anything seen since in the "Ivanhoe" school -- appears to be quite intact. As in so many films of this type, especially those from France, the colorless and generally ineffectual hero is quite overshadowed by the bravura style of the villain -- who in one delightful scene wipes his bloody sword on the long tresses of his
mistress. Incidentally, Aldo Nadi, who plays the villain, was also a celebrated fencer. Jackie Mannon, the heroine, turned up later as the French girl in Pabst's "Westfront".

THE INFORMER (British International Pictures, 1929) Directed by Dr. Arthur Robison; Executive Producer, John Maxwell; based on the novel by Liam O'Flaherty; photographed by Theodor Sparkuhl; camera assistant, Jack Cardiff. Art Directors: Walter Roehrig and Robert Herith.

Gypo Nolan (Lars Hanson); Katie Fox (Lya de Putti); Francis McPhillip (Carl Harbord); Gallagher (Warwick Ward); Mrs McPhillip (Daisy Campbell); Mulholland (Craig Sherry); Murphy (Dennis Wyndham); Bessie (Janice Adair)

In the late 20's and early 30's, the British studios were full of imported European talent, predominantly German. The same situation applied in Hollywood too of course, most notably at Universal, Paramount and Fox. Hollywood absorbed into its permanent strength the top talents; discarded those that were weaker or unadaptable. England, five years behind the times as always, retained the system until it not only outlived its usefulness but became a liability. The stars that the British producers fondly believed were "big names" in their own countries were usually has-beens in a boxoffice sense, and in overseas markets proved to be milestones around the necks of already none-too-attractive filmic packages. (British producers alas, never learned. The kind of films they're turning out en masse now, and the stars they're utilising, might have been sure-fire five years ago. Today, despite quality, their very familiarity prevents their rising above the "B" market).

But "The Informer" was made well before this period; the craftsmen and stars involved were still top-flight, and at the height of their creative and box office powers. Director Robison, actually an American, formerly a doctor, had been responsible for such fascinating German "Golden Age" films as "Warworks" and "Manon Lescaut". (He later returned to work in American films, with somewhat less distinction). His cameraman, Sparkuhl, had been with Lubitsch on the Jannings and Negri films ("Sumurun", "Deception", "Passion") and likewise came to America (in 1933) where he photographed many Paramount talkies, among them "Wells Fargo", "The Light That Failed" and "Beau Geste". His last film was the James Cagney-William K. Howard "Johnny Come Lately".

Like "The Wrecker", "Transatlantic Tunnel" and many of the other British films of 1928-1935 made with partially German talent, "The Informer" has a very Germanic feel to it. Many scenes, frozen into still frames, look as though they could have come from a dozen German silents. But oddly enough, so many of the "great" German classics look infinitely better as stills than they do as films. So many seldom "unfrozen" into cinema. "The Informer" on the other hand, has fine pacing and rhythm. It has art without "artiness". quite certainly, even in abstracted form, it can be seen to be dramatically and filmically superior to John Ford's vastly over-rated, tricky and empty (if superficially interesting) remake. Certainly its story is far more substantial, with subtle irony and intelligent motivations quite absent from the later one. It seems quite certain however that Ford must have studied this version carefully, for many camera set-ups are quite identical. (One wonders whether he studied equally carefully the British version of "The Lost Patrol" -- and indeed, in view of the very high standard of his remake, whether the original was as proportionately superior as is the case with "The Informer"?)

Not that this is in itself a sign of superiority, but this British version has far more production value than Ford's, with some quite elaborate sets of streets and rooftops. (Much of Ford's artificial lighting, fog and blackness was done not so much for its own sake as to conceal the paucity of sets). Although both films have the same basic plot of course, there are interesting
differences in detail. Ford's treatment was "romantic" -- in his Irish
blarney interpretation of the word. The romantic -- or sex -- element
of Robinson's film is far subtler and more powerful. Too, we find here that the
"Party" is actually the Communist Party (something Ford eliminated entirely),
though this element is minimized in this abbreviation. Despite the Irish
names, the Irish locale is not stressed either; if it were not for a Dublin
travel poster in a railroad station scene, the locale would not even have been
suggested. Less sentimental than Ford, the film is perhaps less effective
(emotionally) in its climax, although this may not be true of the complete
version. In any event, it is a fascinating re-discovery and one hopes that
one day it may be revived in toto -- or without the sole talkie sequence
that was later added after its completion in order for it to qualify as a
soundie. One would also give much to be able to see (and I don't see how we
ever will!) what was apparently Robinson's best American film -- the German
version he directed of Dreyer's "The Trial of Mary Duran".

= Intemission =

"FASHIONS OF 1934" (Warner Bros-First National, 1934) 3 reels
Directed by William Dieterle; story by Warren Duff, Harry
Collins; screenplay by F. Hugh Herbert, Carl Erickson, Gene Markey, Kathryn
Scoll; musical number devised and directed by Busby Berkeley; photographed
by William Hess; editor, Jack Hillier. Starring Bette Davis, William Powell,
Frank McHugh, Vera Teasdale, Reginald Owen, Hobart Cavanaugh, Henry O'Neill,
Phillip Reed, Hugh Herbert, Gordon Westcott, Dorothy Burgess, Etienne Girardot,
William Burrell, Nella Walker, Spencer Charters, George Humbert, Frank Darien,
Harry Beresford.

Because it is not basically a musical, and has garnered no reputation for
other merits, "Fashions of 1934" has become one of the most unfamiliar of the
Warner musical comedies of its period, although it is quite certainly one of
the best of that strange group of comedies, romances and dramas ("Shiner and
Kabul", "Wonderbar" etc.) that are everywhere along the line throw caution, logic
and the bankroll to the winds in order to let Busby Berkeley have his head
with one glorious, insane, perennially wonderful number. Here his
contribution is one of his best -- the fantastically Freudian and erotic
"Let Love Take You By The Hand" number. Seldom has even Berkeley had such
a field-day with provocative bosoms, sturdy thighs and undraped female flesh.
This weird and wonderful display has something for everyone -- the fetish
as well as the red-blooded All-American boy.

But "Fashions" has a good deal to offer as well as this well-planned piece of
mathematical pulpititude (which wisely doesn't over-extend itself as "By A
Waterfall" and some of the others did). It's a rattling good comedy which
zips along with such pep and good-humour that one has no time to wonder how
such thin material can be so delightful. A good deal of the credit certainly
goes to urbane, polished William Powell, who as con man Sherwood Nash, never
puts a foot or a phrase wrong. But let's not forget William Dieterle either,
who in films like this and "Jewel Robbery" showed he had a wonderfully deft,
delicate touch for comedy, more than a little akin to Lubitsch. As with so
many "prestige" directors of later years -- Wyler, Wellman, Lercy -- his best
and most vigorous work was done in this early 30's period, when with astonish
versatility he would hop from a "Last Flight" to a "Fog Over Frisco" and
thence to this charming piece of froth. If these films had any kind of common
denominator, it was pace -- something that has sadly disappeared from all film
today -- even those of Dieterle, Wyler and Wellman.

All of our old Warner cronies appear in support of course -- Bette Davis
somewhat over made up and uncomfortable -- and before he landed at MGM, dear
old Reginald Owen, trying desperately to make his British accent sound French
by pronouncing "review" as "revoooo", adds a lot to the fun too. But it's
really those old masters Powell, Berkeley and Dieterle all the way.

----------------------------- Wm. K. Everson -----------------------------