Rowland V. Lee is one of the most curious and unjustly ignored of all film directors. Like E.A. Dupont (with "Variety") he has perhaps only one really great film to his credit -- the lovely and long unseen "Zoo in Budapest"; also like Dupont, he has a string of incredibly varied and tremendously interesting lesser films to his credit -- ranging from such silent pot-boilers as "The Sea Lion" through to one of the better American Pola Negri vehicles, "Barbed Wire", a couple of Fu Manchu thrillers, a couple of Monte Cristo essays and such budget-conscious Nervous-A films as "Captain Kidd" and "The Bridge of San Luis Rey". Recently, his ranch was used as one of the principal locations for William Wyler's "The Friendly Persuasion", and Lee himself returned to films in a production capacity on the Borzage-directed "The Big Fisherman".

Lee had a useful knack of endowing cheap pictures with apparent production value. He also had unquestioned versatility, turning out with ease anything from horror films and comedies to swashbucklers and melodramas. Perhaps because he tackled everything and anything, he never developed much personal style, unless it be a recognisable "penny-dreadful" and overly-gor! approach to subjects of seemingly greater stature (as for example, "Tower of London"). For a while, it seemed that Lee might be following in James Whale's footsteps. After Whale did the first two Frankenstein's for Universal, Lee did the third (and endowed it with very real style; its sets and camerawork are still quite outstanding); Whale did a rousing adventure yarn in "Green Hell," and, almost at the same time, Lee followed through with "The Sun Never Sets". But the all-important element that Whale had in full measure, and that Lee apparently lacked, was taste. There always seemed something just a little shoddy and lurid about Lee's melodramas; his comedies had a slightly labored, self-conscious feeling that Whale's never had.

Lee certainly isn't one of the great unsung masters of the cinema -- but on the other hand, he is a good deal more interesting than many of his far more highly acclaimed cronies. Tonight's program, consisting of two contrasting, and consecutive, films that Lee made in the mid-thirties, present an interesting and fairly representative cross-section of his work.

ONE RAINY AFTERNOON (United Artists, 1936) Presented by Mary Pickford and Jesse Lasky; from a play by Arnold Freesburger and Rene Pujal; screenplay by Stephen M. Avery and Maurice Hanline; musical director, Alfred Newman; lyrics by Preston Sturges, Jack Stern, Harry Tobias; photographed by Peverell Marley, 8 reels.

With: Francis Lederer, Ida Lupino, Hugh Herbert, Roland Young, Erik Rhodes, Joseph Cawthorne, Countess Liev de Maigret, Donald Meek, Georgia Caine, Murray Kinnell, Mischa Auer, Elly Malyon, Richard Carle, Phyllis Barry, Lois January, Seger Ellis, Margaret Warner, Jack Mulhall, Harry Myers, and the following silent players as extras: Jean Acker, Alfredo Valentino (Rudy's brother); Katherine Perry, George Periolat, Francis Powers, Edward Eby, Mary McLaren, Kathleen Key, Florence Lawrence, Florence Turner, Naomi Childers, Rosemary Theby, Vola Vale, Vera Steadman, Donald Reed, Anne Sheaffer, Eric Mayne.

"One Rainy Afternoon" is never quite as clever as it obviously thinks it is, nor does it quite match the effortless charm of the earlier Lubitsch-Chevalier films that it so obviously tries to imitate -- due largely one feels to the rather hard and forced "charm" of Mr. Lederer. But it is the sort of casual, "friendly" film of the thirties that one can still enjoy in a relaxed manner; the music is gay and catchy, the action fast-paced, and the cast full of pleasant people, most of whom have now passed on or are no longer active. The great array of silent players, used as extras, proves hard to spot however;
Harry Myers and Jack Mulhall have good bits, but the others are largely lost in the skating rink and courtroom scenes. I saw "One Rainy Afternoon" as a child - on a rainy afternoon - and the combination of movie title, inclement weather, and much footage inside a movie theatre, proved (to a childish mind) to be the kind of movie "magic" that produced permanent and nostalgic memories. But it is surprising, whether the memories be childish or adult, how many of these slight, unimportant programmers of the thirties -- made with no intention of creating a furore, or of anything other than providing mild diversion -- are remembered with affection, and do stand up well as entertainment. "One Rainy Afternoon" certainly falls into this category.

"LOVE FROM A STRANGER" (United Artists, 1937) From a play by Frank Vosper and Agatha Christie; Associate Producer, Harry Edington; music by Benjamin Britten; screenplay by Frances Marion; photographed by Philip Tamura; Seven Reels; with Basil Rathbone, Ann Harding, Binnie Hale, Bruce Seton, Jean Cadell, Bryan Fowley, Joan Hickson, Donald Calthrop, Eugene Leahy.

There have been a number of interesting star-director collaborations through the years; Ford and Fonda, Howard and Love, Whale and Colleen Clive -- and -- Rowland V. Lee and Basil Rathbone, who made four films together. Lee seemed peculiarly adept at not only controlling Rathbone's tendency to overact, but also at exploiting it, especially in scenes of nervous hysteria. "Love From a Stranger" is one of the best of their collaborations. It is also one of the best of that small, select group of wife-terrorised-by-husband thrillers, of which "Gaslight" is in a sense the prototype, even though not the first. Based on a play by Frank Vosper (who enacted the lead in the London stage version, and himself disappeared mysteriously later - a presumed suicide or murder victim) "Love From a Stranger" is now basically familiar stuff, and yet is so tautly done and well acted, that it maintains suspense still. It remains vastly superior not only to the cloddish American remake (heavy-handed melodramatics and a fistic battle to round it off) but also to the more famous and greatly over-rated Dickinson version of "Gaslight". Perhaps because Ann Harding isn't the mousey little wife that Diana Wynyard was, the battle of wills between husband and wife is far stronger and more dramatic. Too, Anton Walbrook made the murdering husband such a stage stereotype that it has been impossible to take him seriously ever since. Re-seeing "Sixty Glorious Years" again today, one automatically feels that at any moment his Prince Albert is going to hide Victoria's crown as the first step of a campaign to drive her insane! Rathbone on the other hand, is so exactly right all the way -- debonair and charming at first, and suddenly, shockingly insane when one least expects it. There isn't too much attempt to hide the story's stage origins, but the film moves constantly: at key moments there are bizarre camera angles which may be theatrical in themselves, but which work brilliantly in emphasizing the tension and hysteria. Altogether, for a stage adaptation -- and one made in England at a singularly dull period to boot -- "Love From a Stranger" holds its own surprisingly well today, and hasn't dated a whit. In fact, having known it in recent years only via Cavalcanti's "Film and Reality" in which its out-of-context excerpt seems both stilted and even amusing, its overall quality is quite a revelation.

The print is retitled "A Night of Terror", obviously to avoid confusion with the American remake, but seems quite intact and is in reasonably good shape, despite some rather disconcerting scratches here and there. Thanks to tv, and the mass production of this kind of a thing to a half-hour format, it's the kind of thriller that is never made theatrically any more, and it's good to see such well-done vintage stuff again.