A SHORT CYCLE OF HORROR & MYSTERY FROM THE THIRTIES

PROGRAM ONE: THE GREENE MURDER CASE; MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE; THE VAMPIRE BAT

"The Vampire Bat" (Majestic, 1933) Directed by Frank Strayer; photographed by Ira Morgan; with Lionel Atwill, Fay Wray, Helynn Douglas, Robert Frazer, Lionel Belmore, Dwight Frye.

No horror cycle from the thirties could possibly be complete without Lionel Atwill offering Fay Wray "eternal life", and thus this meaty 1-reel version of a six-reeler is a happy substitute for the original. "Happy" because the full film is somewhat of a bore, slowly developed, and totally lacking in incidental music other than for a few bars at the beginning. This fast-moving reel, despite some unavoidable loose ends, makes the film seem a good deal more appetising than it really is, and features some of Atwill's best scenes. Dwight Frye, in the original cast as "Germann Glei", The Idiot", has been trimmed out -- but happily there is some of Robert Frazer left, performing his customary chores as the well-meaning dupe who is forced to aid the madman in his 50% scientific and 50% lecherous schemes.


An immediate follow-up to "The Canary Murder Case", which we also ran recently, "The Greene Murder Case" was likewise put out in completely silent and all-talking form, and occasionally the non-dialogue scenes, which were only shot once and at a slower speed, seem rather jarring. But for the most part, it is both more fun -- and a much better film -- than its predecessor. It doesn't have Louise Brooks of course, and its murders are less intricately plotted. But it moves much faster, has none of those interminable dialogue scenes that marred "Canary", and is certainly more interesting pictorially. The photography is the work of the almost-forgotten (and on this film, un-credited!) cameraman Henry Gerrard, who that same year photographed Von Sternberg's "Thunderbolt", and whose later credits included "The Vagabond King" and the early-30's RKO versions of "Little Women" and "Of Human Bondage". There's a wonderfully Germanic opening which makes one think that perhaps one is in for another "The Cat and the Canary" or "The Bat Whispers". Unfortunately, the script doesn't allow Gerrard that kind of outlet -- but the photography throughout is interesting, and every so often there's a shot that's a real beauty. The climax (unlike that of "Canary") relies on picture rather than sound too, and quite unexpectedly it leaps into a wild combination of Alfred Hitchcock and Pearl White, to round the picture off with a bang. It's generally a slicker job than "Canary", although like that film (also by Tuttle, at least in its sound version) it has no dissolves at all, but only fades. Some of these fades are so abrupt and unexpected, that in the context of a mystery film, they are misleading. One is forever thinking that the lights have suddenly gone out -- only to find that it is a fade after all, and not mere skullduggery. William Powell is as urbane as ever, Haupt takes over from Von Seyffertitz as the customary Teutonic heavy, and Jean Arthur's role seems just an extension of the one she played that same year in "The Saturday Night Kid". The identity of the killer, alas, is painfully obvious from the word go -- but it's easy to overlook since Vance obviously hasn't seen as many early 30's mysteries as we have...
Indeed, in 1929, he couldn't have seen any! In any case, knowing who the killer is doesn't really spoil the fun, as there are still some typical Van Dine surprises to be pulled in the final unravelling. And as in "Canary," the audience can play detective too in spotting all the concealed microphones; one quite certainly must have been hidden in that weird flashlight used by Vance; a huge, cumbersome thing that must have weighed a dozen pounds!

**Intermission**

**MURDERS IN THE RUE MORCUE** (Universal, 1932) Directed by Robert Florey, from the story by Edgar Allan Poe; photographed by Karl Freund; scenario by Tom Reed, Dale Van Every; additional dialogue by John Huston; 7 reels With Bela Lugosi, Sidney Fox, Leon Waycoff (Ames), Bert Roach, Brandon Hurst, Noble Johnson, D'Arcy Corrigan, Herman Bing, Betty Ross Clarke, Arlene Francis.

Although "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is rather closer to Poe than Universal's two "versions" of "The Black Cat," and than Warners' 3-D remake of a few years ago, it actually resembles "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" far more than anything else. In its overall plot, in its characters, even in some of its sets, it parallels the Wienie film to a remarkable degree, and especially in the fairground scenes where the doctor and his "exhibit" are first introduced. Along with such American silents as "The Belle" and "The Cat and the Canary," it certainly puts the lie to that oft-repeated myth that "Caligari" influenced nobody.

Because its plot is such unabridged thick-haired Grand Guignol, it doesn't have quite the stature of some of the other horror films of the early 30's -- "Mystery of the Wax Museum," "The Mummy," and "The Black Cat" in particular. But as a sheer horror film, it certainly pays off; some of the shock effects (the discovery of the mother's corpse, stuffed head down in the chimney for example) and the unrestrained savagery (Lugosi's "experiment"on Arlene Francis, who incidentally resolutely refuses ever to discuss the film! have not often been topped. And they have often been cut from this film too, in its theatrical and television showings, although this print is fortunately intact. However, it is shock and savagery with a certain amount of taste and restraint; none of the gore and detailed blood-letting that we have been in for in the last decade of overdone and largely ineffectual horror films.

All told, it's a handsome and stylish production, with some very impressive sets (including some wonderful roof-top stuff) and fine photography. And Lugosi of course, enjoys himself to the hilt with heavy makeup and some glorious dialogue -- little of which seems to have come from John Huston, who devoted most of his time to interesting pseudo-literary and quite flowery exchanges between hero and heroine.

Robert Florey recently made the absurd statement that the film was made in three days. Why so many talented and normally sober film-makers so often come out with these idiotic claims is a lasting mystery -- and it is particularly unfortunate in Florey's case. His has been a curious career, full of interesting associations (such as that with Chaplin) and good pictures, but no really great ones. He has always alleged that his best work, including preliminary work on "Frankenstein," has always been abandoned or changed, but his unqualified claims about this film make so many of his other remarks suspect. Fascinating stories can be told about the way quickies can be made in a matter of days -- but this isn't that kind of picture. For one thing, no company of Universal's size was making three-day quickies in the thirties. They weren't geared for that kind of shooting, even for westerns, and there was no need for it. And one glance at the film proves what an impossible claim it is. Even assuming that Florey went into it with all
sets fully completed, and a few establishing and other shots already finished by a second unit, the sheer number of the set-ups and the often quite complicated camera movements, would defeat any really rapid shooting aims. And certainly, no director aiming at finishing a film in three days, would waste time with that dizzy and complicated shot on the swing -- which probably took the best part of a day in itself. Finally, it is impossible to conceive of two such men as Bela Lugosi and Karl Freund -- both then relatively unfamiliar with the language, and both possessed of super-egos -- either being persuaded, or being able, to work at such top-speed.

Even for a real cut-and-cut quickie, devoid of any style at all, a three-day schedule is pretty good going. Columbia did it in the 50's, with their "Durango Kid" westerns -- and with 50% of the film coming from the stock shot library anyway -- and the speed and economy showed.

So it's as well to discount many of Mr. Florey's "inside" revelations. (The 3-day story on this film is quoted again in the current "Sight and Sound"). His work is good, pictorially interesting, often very fast-paced, his few horror films ("The Beast With Five Fingers") have always been well above the average. But it's curious that it's always the "interesting" directors who've never quite made it that complain the loudest about their "ruined" works. One just doesn't find such complaints from Griffith, Ford, Lubitsch, Mamoulian, Welles and Vidor have griped about pet projects it's true, but they've been general (and usually justified) gripes about specific changes that were inflicted; they haven't been hymns to the greatness they would have achieved without interference.

Perhaps we're a little off-base in devoting so much time to Mr. Florey's remarks, aimed at the press and designed for their quotability. But it's important, even in this small way, to try to set the record straight. There is quite enough distortion in the film history books as is, without the film-makers themselves adding to it for no other reason than mere transient publicity.

"Murders in the Rue Morgue" at any rate is one of Florey's most enjoyable pictures, and a most enjoyable reminder of those early-30's chillers that were so rich in mood, atmosphere, and stylish Gothic terror.

William K. Everson

NEXT PROGRAMS:

Sunday next, July 29th, New Yorker Theatre. 9.30 a.m. 35mm show, all silent

THE MYSTERY IN ROOM 47 with Ralph Herz, May White; THE BLUE FOX, ep. 5;
TIMES SQUARE with Alice Day, Arthur Lubin, John Miljan, Natalie Joyce

Tuesday next, July 31, Adelphi Hall, 7.30

THE MUMMY (1932) directed by Karl Freund; with Karloff, Edward Van Sloan
SHERLOCK HOLMES (1939) directed by Alfred Werker, with Basil Rathbone;
Ida Lupino, George Zucco as Moriarty, Nigel Bruce.

THE LAUREL & HARDY MURDER CASE -- a 3-reel L & H; quite funny, very grim!

And on Friday of this week at the Adelphi Hall at 7.00 p.m., there will be the monthly meeting of THE FILM GROUP. The usual pot-pourri of last-minute and transient items, which somehow always manages to encompass both silent and sound material.