NIGHT CLUB SCANDAL (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Ralph Murphy; from a play by Daniel N. Rubin; screenplay by Lillie Hayward; Photographed by Leo Tover 7 reels

Not an important movie by any standards, nor even really a very good one, "Night Club Scandal" is nevertheless extremely enjoyable and interesting for a variety of reasons. For a "B", it is quite well mounted, and its well-knit mystery story certainly holds attention. Secondly, it is a Barrymore, and an unfamiliar one, albeit one from his "rock bottom" period. Apart from his last couple of pictures, no Barrymore films were quite as distressing to his admirers as those he made for Paramount in the 37-38 period. He was given supporting roles quite unworthy of him in big films ("Spawn of the North") and leads in "B" pictures -- without star billing. Sometimes he came through beautifully, as in "True Confession" (a sparkling comedy performance) or in "Bulldog Drummond's Revenge" in which he had a high old time donning several macabre disguises. But at other times - and especially in "Bulldog Drummond's Peril" - he shows how tired and sick he must have been, and by his performance expressed his contempt for the role he had been handed. "Night Club Scandal" is neither the best nor the worst of Barrymore's films in this period; he does look rather wan, but the role is sufficiently intelligent for him to approach it seriously. Once in a while - delightfully - the old Barrymore bravura and gestures creep out too. However, although a key role, it is not a large role in terms of footage, and whenever he is off-screen, the film loses a little of its none-too-secure stature.

The title is quite meaningless and inapt incidentally. The film is a remake of the old (1932) Lowe-McClellan "Guilty As Hell", in which the Barrymore role was played by Henry Stephenson. (Elizabeth Patterson played the same role in both versions). It's ironic that Barrymore should be playing in a "B" remake of a 5-year-old "A" film just then; at almost the same time, his 1932 starring vehicle "State's Attorney" was also being remade -- as a "B" for another slipping star, Lee Tracy. But luckily, the Paramounts were not to be Barrymore's screen epitaph; his great days were over, but at least a handful of good roles lay ahead, to rekindle the old image -- "The Great Man Votes", "The Great Profile", "World Premiere".

With a story as good as "Night Club Scandal" has to offer, and such a strong cast of veteran reliables, it's a pity that it couldn't have been handed a more imaginative director. Robert Florey for example could have gotten far more style into this. And he would never have committed the directorial faux-pas of having the audience's collective eye trained on the right of the screen in one scene just as Barrymore goes into an unexpected tirade on the left. (I think I have those directions reversed in error; it's in an interrogation scene, and it is Barrymore who is on the right of the screen). However, for all its flaws (which include an over-healthy dose of Lynne Overman, normally very enjoyable, but here a little too much of a good thing, at least in the first half of the film, as he tries to emulate the old bantering around Lowe performance), "Night Club Scandal" is a neat little programmer. It seems rather churlish to pick at such a film critically when it never planned to be more than a pleasant filler, and even on that level manages to be more entertaining -- today -- than a great many of the super-specials that eat up 16 reels and offer less than these 7.
GENTLEMEN ARE BORN (Warner Bros-First National, 1934) Directed by Alfred E. Green; screenplay by Eugene Solow and Robert Lee Johnson, from a story by Johnson; photographed by James Van Trees. 8 reels.

With Franchot Tone, Jean Muir, Margaret Lindsay, Ann Dvorak, Ross Alexander, Charles Starrett, Dick Foran, Russell Hicks, Robert Light, Arthur Aylesworth, Henry O'Neill, Addison Richards, Marjorie Gateson, Bradley Page.

Like "Night Club Scandal", "Gentlemen Are Born" is an obscure film. Few people are aware that these two films even exist, so they haven't even advanced to the stage of being "forgotten films" as yet. We're not trying to suggest that there is automatic, intrinsic merit in a film that is "obscure" or "forgotten"; heaven knows there are enough unnecessary cults now without trying to form new ones. And we're not reviving these two films today with any purpose or comment other than it's a shame that so many unimportant but good films are forgotten. They deserve a dusting-off now and then -- just as Gene Stratton Porter or Warwick Deeping ought to be thumbeded through now and then, between Dickens, Steinbeck and Hemingway.

"Gentlemen Are Born" is a curiously "formula" film on a non-formula plot. The depression years were full of movies about the depression of course. The gangster films; the social exposés; the Cinderella stories in which a poor girl fell in love with a millionaire posing as a bum. There were endless variations, and "Gentlemen Are Born" has echoes of some of them -- as well as suggesting somewhat the "Four Daughters" essays in stylish soap opera that were to emerge as the depression went into an upswing. But most of all, "Gentlemen Are Born" seems to suggest a reshuffling of William Dieterle's "The Last Flight", made three years earlier, and one of the best movies about Hemingway's "lost generation" of the 20's. (Perhaps Hemingway shouldn't be associated with that generation any more than Scott Fitzgerald, but "The Last Flight" did parallel Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" to a surprising degree.

"Gentlemen Are Born" switches the motivation around a little. While the earlier film showed us jaded, disillusioned wartime flers adrift in the energetic but empty 20's, here we have idealistic, opportunity-seeking, optimist students suddenly faced with a barren era that has no place for them, cannot use their energy, and rapidly kills off their ideals. But if the motivation is changed, the basic action and situations retain a marked parallel. But unlike "The Last Flight", which stuck to its guns until the end, "Gentlemen Are Born" switches frequently into contrived plot twists and romantic sues which couldn't have made the film that much more popular with a mass audience, and at the same time prevents it from being as dramatically interesting as it might have been.

Too, like so many Hollywood films of the thirties and forties, it often betrays its lack of touch with reality through the most obvious details. It's hard to believe in Franchot Tone as a penniless, struggling young reporter when he seems to wear a different, and highly stylish, suit in every other scene. Having him say that if he pays for the dinner he'll have to walk home doesn't quite add up when one looks at the ritzy restaurants to which he takes Margaret Lindsay! However, as with "Night Club Scandal", we shouldn't perhaps be too picky -- instead we should be grateful that such worthwhile, even if not wholly satisfactory, program pictures could be made at one time. The film offers yet another example of the extreme versatility of Alfred E. Green, as well as a pleasing array of the old Warner stock company. How nice it is to see Jean Muir again, one of the loveliest and one of the most sensitive of the young actresses of the thirties; and maybe one day the MFA will do a "retrospective" on Margaret Lindsay, or Eastman House will discover her and present an "homage". Not that she was that great -- but think of all the WB films she was in, and how much fun it would be to see them all in one fell swoop!