"THE NINTH GUEST" (Columbia, 1934) Directed by Roy William Neill; photographed by Benjamin Kline; screenplay by Garnett Weston, from a "play" by Owen Davis, Gwen Bristow and Bruce Manning; edited by Gene Milford; 7 reels


A curious forerunner of Agatha Christie's "Ten Little Indians", which has almost exactly the same plot, "The Ninth Guest" is one of those typical mysteries of the thirties revolving around a fantastically elaborate revenge plot, and equipped with an abundant supply of red herrings and suspects. In this particular case, characters are killed off, one by one, in a modernistic skyscraper apartment, rimmed with electrical traps! It hardly matters that one spots the killer the moment he/she makes an entrance, or that one sees through his/her mechanical devices. It is fun however, just to sit back and watch it follow all the established rules, and have all the suspects go through the type-cast paces that are expected of them. Somehow, Edwin Maxwell will scheme and cajole as only he can -- and of course, he doesn't let us down. And if the ending carries no real surprise, it does offer a certain amount of shock value -- although it's a little hard to accept the killer's explanation that he set up this fantastically expensive death trap by carefully saving his/her money through the years!

Television has virtually killed off this kind of mystery, and the fast paced thrillers of the forties and fifties have accustomed us to a more dynamic kind of movement. Despite its brief running time, "The Ninth Guest" does seem slow at times, partly because of obvious story developments, and partly because of the lack of incidental music. But, by the same token, "Underworld" and "Public Enemy" seem slow today too. "The Ninth Guest" is hardly a film to warrant such illustrious comparisons; it is a programmer, pure and simple, of no great value in the overall march of cinema, but it has a nostalgic interest today, and its story and cast certainly hold attention. Roy William Neill, who directed, turned out some first-class thrillers and minor horror films in the thirties (the British "Dr. Syn"), Karloff's "The Black Room"), and in the forties offered some of the better Universal Holmes films, and "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man". "The Ninth Guest" in any event is a good typical little mystery, and on that great day in some filmic Valhalla when all films are offered to he who is pure of heart, doubtless it will merit a prominent place in a mystery cycle also comprising "The Thirteenth Guest", "The Thirteenth Chair", "The Ex-Mrs Bradford" and "The Bat".

"HYDE AND HARE" (Warner Bros., 1955) Dir: I. Freleng One reel

We need hardly apologise for stepping out of the thirties to offer this bizarre little cartoon, since cartoons were the only form of film life that were better in the fifties than in the thirties. By then cartoons were frequently satirising horror traditions, often in nightmareish fashion, and this little effort, though not top standard, is nonetheless diverting. Bugs Bunny runs afoul of a Lorré-like scientist in a cartoon that certainly belongs in any horror cycle.

--- Intermission ---
ISLAND OF LOST SOULS (Paramount, 1932; released 1933) Directed by Erle C. Kenton; based on "The Island of Dr. Moreau" by H.G. Wells; screenplay by Philip Nynie & Waldemar Young; photographed by Karl Struss. 8 reels


With "Mystery of the Wax Museum" and "The Ghoul" now rather definitely established as being extinct, and "The Most Dangerous Game" and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (Mamoulian) still in existence, but held off the market in this country, "Island of Lost Souls" becomes the last of the "lost" horror films of the thirties that we're likely to see, everything else ("Murders in the Zoo", "Mask of Fu Manchu", "Dr. X" etc.) having turned up somewhere along the line. Paramount billed it as "H.G. Wells' surging rhapsody of terror".

Because it has been unavailable for so long, and because it was always a rather controversial horror film, it is inevitable that expectations will have been built up to a point where the film, even if it were good, couldn't hope to fulfill them. And, unfortunately, the film is not good; it's a rather nasty and tasteless little work which will certainly please the horror fans, but which as a film has none of the style of "The Mummy", "The Black Cat", "Mystery of the Wax Museum" or even the rather pedestrian "Dracula"; and it certainly can't hold a candle to the film it most closely resembles, "The Most Dangerous Game". It is fun of course, and we'll get to that in a moment.

Even initially, the film disappointed at the boxoffice. After a spectacular stunt advertising campaign, built primarily around the "Panther Woman" angle, the film dropped quite dead in theaters. H.G. Wells was quite outspoken in denouncing the film as a travesty of his original story, which while containing horror ingredients, was far from the lurid Grand Guignol of this film. As a Wells adaptation, it certainly fell far short of the same year's stylish "Invisible Man" from James Whale. In England, the film was banned outright by the censors, presumably for the same reason that they banned "Freaks" in the same period - a tasteless combination of crassness and sex. ("Souls" did finally get into English release a couple of years ago, but "Freaks" never did).

The basic problem with "Island of Lost Souls" is the same one that we find in almost all of the current Hammer films (although it is at least superior to them) -- it has all the ingredients, but none of the necessary mood or atmosphere. One is often repelled by "Island of Lost Souls", but one is never convinced by it - not even within the limited powers of conviction of most horror films - and thus one is never remotely frightened by any of it. Somehow it is all as casual and ineffectual as its almost disinterested introduction of Laughton as Dr. Moreau; compare this scene with our first glimpses of Karloff in "The Black Cat" for example. There is not a note of background music to help create mood, and there is a listlessness to the direction that is hard to explain. "Werewolf of London" suffered from that same listless quality, but there were other compensating factors.

Perhaps Laughton is partly to blame. He gives a marvellous performance, but it never quite seems to catch up with the rest of the film. His lines are polished, suave, matchlessly delivered -- so much so that some of his best lines are almost thrown away, and will be lost except to the most attentive listeners. But despite his Satanic beard, he rarely seems to suggest anything much worse than a medically-inclined Captain Hook. Every so often, as he's explaining some phase of his research (after showing us the human monsters that represent satisfactory scientific operations, he refers casually to some
aged and deformed creatures as "my least successful experiments!"") he relaxes his features into a mischievous, cherubic grin, like a schoolboy playing around with forbidden test-tubes in the fourth-form lab. This macabre humour would work wonderfully (as it did for Theisger in "Bride of Frankenstein") if the rest of the film were handled likewise; but everything else, taking in operations, cannibalism and two attempted matings of monster and human, is so grimly straightforward that the film never achieves a proper balance. Horror films can certainly benefit from humour, as Whale and "Mystery of the Wax Museum" have shown us; and they can benefit equally well from a total lack of humour, as witness "Vampyr" and "The Mummy". "Island of Lost Souls" falls between these two camps, and falls short of both.

For a horror film that is as much fun as this one however, even in a rather twisted way, we've probably been a little hard on "Island of Lost Souls"—probably because it's so annoying to see such good potential squandered on clap-trap treatment. Overlooking all its faults, the film still has a lot to offer. Karl Struss' camerawork achieves some nice effects, especially in the night scenes, and the sets of jungle and bizarre mansion are often striking. Some scenes have a curious sort of power, especially those crane-shots as Laughton, God-like, addresses the natives with a staccato speech that seems like a deliberate perversion of Rudyard Kipling's child-like, human "Jungle Book"ingo. Other assets include Bela Lugosi, in an incredibly minor role for him (at that time), giving a surprisingly good performance beneath some truly horrendous ape-man makeup. And the climax itself is a real shocker, a nightmare of horror comparable only to the climax of Tod Browning's "Freaks". If the rest of the film were as successful in creating shock, it would be a far better film. But for the most part, it is content to be merely gruesome as if that in itself were enough.

Erle C. Kenton was a curious director who never made a really first-rate film, but seemed able to tackle any type of film and do a better-than-average job. In the twenties, he seemed to shine best as a second-string Lubitsch, and it's a pity that the comedies of his that are considered his best from this period, just aren't around any more. (The two-reel condensation of his "Small Town Idol" for Sennett indicates that he really knew how to make comedies!) In the thirties, he seemed to concentrate most of all on tough actioners with Jack Holt and high-class melodramas like "Guilty As Hell", of which our recently-shown "Night Club Scandal" was a remake. In the forties, he took on everything from Abbott and Costello to the last really good Frankenstein opus, "Ghost of Frankenstein". He died quite recently, after a long spell of inactivity. In his final years, he had a drinking problem, though not a serious one. He was occasionally offered directorial chores, read scripts, thought over the offers - and then decided not to bother. I spoke with him on the phone in his Pasadena home in late 1960; at that time he seemed quite comfortably off, and satisfied to lead a fairly lazy existence. He considered his own best pictures "The Rejuvenation of Aunt Mary", "Small Town Idol", "Lover Come Back" (early 50's version) and "Ghost of Frankenstein", and was somewhat surprised that I considered his best film Jack Holt's "End of the Train" (in which Kenton appeared as Teddy Roosevelt, and which came to a hauntingly poignant climax as Holt is hung for the killing of the villain). "Island of Lost Souls" is a film that he liked making, because he enjoyed doing horror films, but which he didn't seem to care for as a film.

Anyway, one more rarity is knocked off our list .... now let's get to work and try to find "The Wizard" and "The Last Warning"!

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Next Tuesday; Ford's THE WHOLE TOWN'S TALKING; Sturges' THE LADY EVE

Comings: FARRIED (Constance Bennett) 20,000 LLACULS UNDER THE SEA (1917 vs);
KRS WIGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH (Fields) THE OLD FASHIONED WAY (Fields) THE VIR T UOUS SIN (Cukor, 1930 - Walter Huston, Kay Francis); BEDTIME STORY (Chevalier); and a short cycle of Cavalcanti films.