Two Early Talkies

THE VIRTUOUS SIN (Paramount, 1930) Directed by George Cukor and Louis Gasnier; scenario by Martin Brown and Louise Long from the play "The General" by Lajos Zilahy; photographed by David Abel; edited by Otho Lovering. 8 reels.

With Walter Huston, Kay Francis, Kenneth MacKenna, Paul Cavanagh, Eric Kalkhurst, Oscar Apfel, Gordon McLeod, Victor Potel, Youccö Troubetskoy.

"The Virtuous Sin" holds the dubious distinction of being probably the worst film ever to be "rediscovered" by the Never overly-critical Huff Society. Our initial thought after seeing it (and having already announced it) was that it would be kinder to let it sink back into limbo, but Kay Francis and George Cukor both have devoted followers, many of whom made their disapproval at such a course quite explicit. So, here it is.

At least, having maligned it so much in our previous Bulletin, nobody will be expecting a great deal, and, with an audience, it may even turn out to be a pleasant surprise. In any event, the Huff Society has always existed to further the interests of film history rather than film appreciation (although the one usually springs from the other), and in a purely academic sense, and especially from Cukor's point of view, the film is interesting. No other society or achieve is ever likely to play it, so perhaps we need make no apologies for giving it this one brief lease on life again.

The film was Cukor's second as a co-director ("Grumpy" preceded it, and "The Royal Family of Broadway" followed it, both in the same year) before becoming a solo director in 1931 with "Tarnished Lady", and establishing himself very quickly as a stylish, if starchy, director with "Girls About Town", "One Hour With You", "What Price Hollywood?" and "A Bill of Divorcement", all within a two year period. Actually the co-director credit on "The Virtuous Sin" is misleading, and undoubtedly the film is almost wholly Cukor's. Louis Gasnier ("The Perils of Pauline"-"Forgotten Commandments"-"Last Outpost") was a hack who specialised in actioners and cheap budget pictures. In all probability he was merely assigned to Cukor to show him the purely technical ropes, leaving Cukor to handle his own mood, pacing, acting styles etc.

For all its flaws, "The Virtuous Sin" is a handsome production, with glossy camerawork and impressively large sets. What hampers it most of all is some of the acting, and especially the madame of the bordello, who is unpleasant to look upon, harsh to listen to, and who eats up endless footage in some scenes to no purpose. (Incidentally, the bordello, about the size of the White House though a little livelier, is tastefully referred to as a restaurant most of the time, and the kiddies of 1930 may well have wondered why it was so shameful to work as a waitress!). Without these lags in pacing, the film would be infinitely better, and if it were all as wonderfully absurd and larger than life as the last three reels, it would be a joy to behold. Suddenly every line becomes a blockbuster, every situation a show-stopper, and every cliche delivered with the aplomb that must have favoured Shakespeare's most immortal lines in their first appearance. The last third of the film, with its magnificent theatrics, makes up for a lot -- and Kenneth MacKenna's homecoming scene (as underplayed as Walthall's in "The Birth of a Nation", though scarcely as effective) must surely rank as one of the funniest misfire scenes in the history of film.

--- Intermission ---
THE MIRACLE MAN (Paramount, 1932) Directed by Norman McLeod; screenplay by Waldo Young and Samuel Hoffenstein, from the story by Frank L. Packard and Robert H. Davis, and the play by George H. Cohan; photographed by David Abel. 9 reels
With Chester Morris, Sylvia Sidney, Irving Pichel, John Wray, Robert Coogan, Boris Karloff, Robert Bosworth, Ned Sparks, Lloyd Hughes, Virginia Bruce, Florine Mickenney, Frank Darien, Jackie Searle, Lew Kelly.

Unfortunately we haven't seen the original, 1919, version of "The Miracle Man", directed by George Loane Tucker, but sometimes one can be fairer to a remake through thus having to judge it solely on its own. I don't suppose there can be much doubt that the original was superior, if only by that law of averages which has shown us that originals are almost always better than their remakes. But still this 1932 "Miracle Man" is a sound and powerful picture. It is still close enough to the silent period to mix its religion and melodrama in that skilful, tasteful way that seemed such a part of the twenties. Its bizarre plot hasn't been altered, and it still shows its kinship to Tod Browning, "The Unholy Three" and "The White Tiger". Further, there has been no move to update its mood, modernise the motivations or introduce too much logic. The faith-healing of the Miracle Man just has to taken on trust, and the film never tries to sermonise or explain. Nor has the cynical con-man hero been made more "acceptable", as happens in so many remakes -- he "reforms" at the end, not through any new-found faith, but because it has become the only way he can keep his mistress. And last but not least, the limited but tremendously effective use of background music is done in the richly emotional style of the scores that so often accompanied silent films. All in all, it remains an extremely satisfying film.

There are inevitably, flaws. Ned Sparks' wisecracking dialogue dates a little, though his performance holds up well. After the enormously moving miracle sequence at the midway point -- incidentally a sequence done in the rich silent style, and entirely without dialogue -- there is an unavoidable let-down for a reel or two. But by the climax, the lost ground has been recovered.

Norman McLeod, primarily a comedy director - and a good one - handles both the emotional and melodramatic content with equal facility, and gets some real zip into a fight scene and a fall over a balcony. And the performances are uniformly good. Chester Morris is ideally cast as the con-man, and apart from giving a good performance, Sylvia Sidney - for the first and perhaps the only time in her career - manages to get a real sensual quality into her acting too. Robert Bosworth of course can hardly put a foot wrong in this kind of thing, and John Wray is quite astonishingly good as the Frog, obviously basing his performance on Lon Chaney's, and yet holding up rather well despite such an unequal comparison. Robert Coogan, in his few scenes, wrings the heart as thoroughly as he did in "Skippy", and how saddening it is to think of his recent misadventures. (Two weeks ago he was arrested for peddling dope from the back room of his Hollywood Hobby Shop). And finally, dear old Boris Karloff -- greasy, repellent, in another variation of his "Five Star Final" role, lecherously watching Sylvia Sidney undress through a keyhole!

Other than some rather grim sound effects -- bones snapping and popping back into place as the phoney cripple unwinds -- sound and dialogue haven't added to the overall effect of "The Miracle Man". But, surprisingly for such a fragile story, they haven't really harmed it either. It's the kind of story that nobody would film any more - more's the pity - but it's good, solid story-telling nonetheless, and still carries quite a punch with it.
We are deliberately running this excerpt after the remake in order that it not give away story details, or influence one into constantly making comparisons. Quite obviously from these scenes, Chaney's performance is quite remarkable, and let us hope that one day we may see the whole film. The two versions seem to be quite alike in not only detail, but also in the way individual sequences are set up. However, it's rather odd to note that the reconstruction of the "miracle" scene in the Chaney biography, "Man of a Thousand Faces", suggests that it is the remake rather than the original that was studied, and one hopes that this doesn't mean that the first version has been lost. Judging from stills, the original made more of the Chinese underworld locale at the story's opening, but apart from this both versions seem quite alike and presumably faithful to the original -- which of course is as it should be, when one has good material to work with.

Next Sunday morning - New Yorker Theatre, 9.30 a.m. -

King Vidor's STELLA DALLAS (1937) with Barbara Stanwyck, John Roaches, Tim Holt.
Another episode of THE BLUE FOX with Ann Little; a special trailer publicising RAIN, and showing Gable and other stars arriving for the premiere at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, and any other shorts that there is time for.

Next Tuesday, Oct. 30th., Adelphi Hall, 7.30.

"THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER" (1926) with Charles Emmett, Mack, Henry B. Walthall, Claire McDowell, Marguerite de la Motte -- one of the many imitations of "The Big Parade".

And an hour of comedy -- Hal Roach's NO FATHER TO GUIDE HIM, a really excellent Charlie Chan that we have in our hands only briefly, and thus are substituting for the announced Chase, INNOCENT HUSBANDS, which we'll now play in November; and two Mack Sennett's with Billy Bevan and Vernon Dent -- HOBOKEN TO HOLLYWOOD and BUTTERFINGERS.

Friday November 2nd., Adelphi Hall, 7.30

Josef von Sternberg's AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY (1931) with Sylvia Sidney, Phillips Holmes, Frances Dee, Irving Pichel.
This long maligned Sternberg film turns out to be a surprisingly good work after all, and suggests a little borrowing from the ill-fated Eisenstein script. Less lush than Stavans' later remake, but a comparable production.

PROFESSOR BLAKE (1938) with Harold Lloyd, directed by Elliot Nugent, and written by Delmer Daves and Clyde Bruckman. A slow beginning, but the second half is a marvellous parade of sight gags and wild slapstick; quite a revelation for a film as late as 1938, and grand fun.

THERE MAY BE NO REGULAR NOVEMBER BULLETIN UNTIL AFTER THIS EXTRA NOV. 2nd SHOW, SO PLEASE PASS THE WORD ALONG TO ANYONE YOU FEEL MAY NOT HAVE HEARD ABOUT IT. SINCE IT WAS ANNOUNCED AT THE FILM GROUP, AND HAS BEEN LISTED ON THREE REGULAR SETS OF HUFF NOTES HOWEVER, WE FEEL THAT MOST OF OUR REGULARS ARE AWARE OF IT.