"Discord" (1963) Produced and directed by John Serrano; narrated by Bill Maselino. 3 reels.

With Cinema 16 now no longer operative, we're spared many of the amateurish and adolescent so-called "experimental" films that literally aren't worth the celluloid they're printed on. But oddly we're also denied the occasionally really worthwhile film from which we can only loosely term "experimental" filmmakers, and more important, those filmmakers have lost a kind of showcase that can and often did lead to a film being picked up for commercial distribution. It is neither our function nor intent to try to replace Cinema 16 in this respect, and we certainly have no illusions about our prestige value as a showcase. Our reason for showing "Discord" is that it is just too good a film to be lost in the shuffle and that it deserves to be shown -- if not to potential distributors, then at least to an audience that enjoys good film.

"Discord" is a first film by John Serrano, and it is wholly his film in that he both directed and photographed it. It is good enough to overcome two almost insurmountable obstacles -- 1) it is "about" life on the Bowery, and 2) it opens with a Coney Island sequence -- two elements that have been so done to death by New York film-makers that one shudders at the thought of more such. (Curiously, there are all sorts of restrictions about shooting a tree in Central Park, but apparently none in photographing human derelicts.) "Discord" easily overcomes one's initial (if unfair) antagonism about its plot material via its professional and un-showy approach. There is little in the way of filmic fireworks, and most of the camerawork and editing is firmly grounded in the old school of functional film construction. The compositions are pleasing, the camerawork sharp and steady -- and if these are things that we should take for granted, then it's a pity that so few of the younger filmmakers admit it. The story itself is quite moving, and makes its points without undue stress on equalizer and degradation. Thanks to an attractive leading lady who looks a little like Elizabeth Taylor, and plot incident a little reminiscent of Dreiser, moments of the film seem to have an affinity to "A Place in the Sun" -- but I suspect that this is an unavoidable accident, and one that wasn't even apparent until the film was finally assembled.

"Discord" is not a great work, and doesn't pretend to be. But for a first film, it is an astonishingly assured piece of work. If I seem unduly enthusiastic, it is partly because having seen so many thoroughly inept films of this type -- many by "directors" who have made a number of films and consider themselves veterans -- it is a real pleasure to see one of professional standards. It'll be interesting to see what transpires for it -- and for John Serrano. Presumably, if nothing else, it could introduce him to the world of smoothly-made industrial documentary subjects; but -- also presumably -- that is probably not what he had in mind.

EUROPEAN COMMERCIALS (One reel)

A compilation of British and French TV and theatrical commercials that should be quite a revelation to those of you who are hardened to the "But don't forget -- you have to dial RIGHT NOW!" brand of commercials. Most of these examples are so soft-sell and so abstract that it's almost impossible to figure out what the product is, let alone be irritated by it!


I'm not sure when we last played this Laurel & Hardy comedy, though I suspect it was quite a while back. Certainly our previous print was not as good as this one, and in any case, the Laurel & Hardy films -- like the Chaplin Mutuals -- stand any number of re-viewings. This one, a casual reworking of their silent "Slipping Wives", is far from being one of their best, but does have some superb moments. Most of all is Hardy's marvellous pantomime, with some of his most subtle and selling side-long glances at the audience, as Laurel goes into a prolonged kiss with Mae Busch. Their hard-felt and determined efforts to sell Christmas Cards to potential customers who are either too drunk or too worried to be bothered are also right out of the top L&H drawer. If the first half is better than the second, it doesn't really matter too much, and at least the latter half of the film, despite a few rather labored verbal gags, gives us a nice scene in the old "Below Zero" saloon set, and a closing gag that wraps it all up very neatly.

-- Intermission --
UNION DEPOT (Warner Brothers, 1932) Directed by Alfred E. Green
Scenario by Kenyon Nicholson and Walter DeLeon from a story by
Gene Fowler, Joe Laurie and Douglas Durkin; dialoguers, John Bright
and Robert Glanmum; photographed by Sol Polito; edited by Jack
Killifer; 9 reels

With: Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Joan Blondell, Guy Kibbee, Alan Hale, George
Rosener, Dickie Moore, Ruth Hall, Mae Madison, Polly Walters, George Ernest,
David Landau, Lilian Bond, Frank McHugh, Junior Coghlan, Adrienne Dorf, Earle
Foxe, Mary Doran, Dorothy Christy, Robert Homans, Otto Hoffman, Sam McDaniel,
Ethel Griffiee, Charles Lane, Furnell Pratt, Pat Wing, Claire McDowell, Frank
Darien, Cyril Ring, Spencer Charters, Maude Eburne, George Chandler, Irving Bacon,

Good old Warners! "Union Depot" could have been directed by Wellman or LeRoy
or Ray Del Ruth instead of Green, and one would never have known, but devoid of
any main titles at all, any frame of the film could give away its Warner
origin! No film factory of the thirties packed and branded its product
quite the way Warners did, and it's really quite amazing how many films they
made that had individual merits while retaining a kind of collective uniformity.

"Union Depot", which came out in January of 1932, is clearly an attempt to jump
the gun on "Grand Hotel" which had been in production earlier and which, due to
the less hurried manner in which the wheels went around at MGM, would not be
released until April. It has the same basic pattern and construction that is
maintained today in similar "all-star" films like "The V.I.P.'s", but while
the two MGM films conducted themselves on a somewhat higher social strata, this
Warner film replaces ballerinas and barons with floozies, con-men and a
particularly vicious sex degenerate! It has a little something for everyone,
from racist gags to romance, but with the stress on melodrama. The climax
reaches a real pitch of excitement with a whale of a chase and stunt fight
through the railyards and atop a locomotive. And considering the audience-
pleasing ingredients throughout, the climax is a surprisingly honest and off-beat
one -- without being so off-beat as to send the customers home unhappy.

All in all, "Union Depot" is an unimportant but tight, fast-paced, and
tremendously enjoyable programmer, and not the least of its delights is its
huge roster of familiar players (only a third of those listed above are in
the official cast list). Alan Hale, in the equivalent of Wallace Beery's
"Grand Hotel" role, is very effective, and there's a chilling performance from
that curious individual George Rosener -- a playwright, scenarist, director,
actor and former circus, vaudeville and medicine show performer, who in addition
to all these talents bears an uncanny resemblance to our own beloved Seymour
Stern. Rosener plays the degenerate, and plays him uncommonly well.

---

Wm. K. Everson

---

Next program: Tuesday next -- two hard-boiled comedies from 1932 --

BLESSÈD EVENT (dir: Roy Del Ruth) with Lee Tracy, Mary Brian, Ned Sparks,
Frank McHugh, Dick Powell, Jack LaRue

THE GREEKS HAD A WORD FOR THEM (dir: Lowell Sherman) with Ina Claire, Madge
Evans, Joan Blondell, Lowell Sherman, David Manners.