Two Early Talkies by Mervyn LeRoy

I hope that everyone here this evening is aware of the cancellation of "Broadminded". We were notified of the unavailability of that promised print only a matter of hours after our Jan/Feb mailing went out. Since we have had five programs prior to tonight in which to announce the change, we assumed that that way - and via a few telephone calls - just about everyone would be aware of the change. If anyone didn't get to hear about it, and is here specifically for "Broadminded", we apologise. These things happen sometimes in film society programming, and on the whole we've been very lucky in being able to stick to announced programs. As and when " Broadminded" becomes available again, we will of course re-schedule it.

In a sense however, our change is for the better. We now have two LeRoy films from the same period, both stage adaptations, both with Robinson. The comparison is interesting -- as is the inconsistency of both director and star, of which more later. "Five Star Final" had a one-day showing at the New Yorker a couple of years ago, and few got to see it because of a blizzard. Coincidentally, it is snowing again as these notes are typed, so for the sake of this very fine film, let's hope history doesn't repeat itself.

"TWO SECONDS" (First National, 1932) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy; scenario by Harvey Thew from a play by Lester Elliott; camera: Sol Polito; 7 rls


Last week in our notes for "Employees' Entrance" we commented on the prodigious number of stage plays used by Warners in the early 30's, and how - unlike the stage-derived films being made at the same time by Rko - the pacing and dynamic quality of such Warner films as "Blessed Event" and "Five Star Final" almost always concealed their origin. "Two Seconds" is somewhat of an exception to that rule, although it certainly isn't guilty of the static dullness of the Rko films. A raw little sex melodrama, told in flashback from the electric chair, "Two Seconds" runs for only a tight 55 minutes, but even so a goodly portion of the development is told in lengthy two-people conversations -- Robinson and Foster in their apartment, Robinson and his girl in a dance hall, Robinson's impassioned speech to the judge in the courtroom. The linking scenes of streets, dance floor, prison etc. provide enough variety and change of pace to prevent the film from seeming as talkative as it really is, but can't entirely conceal the theatricality of it all.

The basic flaw of "Two Seconds", and this isn't really a sound criticism, is that it is strictly a film to be seen once only. The first time around, the shock effect of situations and dialogue, the ghoulish matter-of-factness of prison warden Barton Churchill, the zippy early 30's wisecracks, the nostalgic theme tunes ("Too Many Tears" from "Blessed Event" is used quite a lot!) and the overall surface power and realism tend to grab hold of one and make it seem like quite a picture. The second time around, alas, it begins to fall apart. One realises how filmmaker is its plot structure, and how basically pointless is Robinson's final speech. And Robinson himself becomes almost a parody of his screen image in his big semi-mad scene, where he gestures, puffs at cigarettes, whirls around, stares bugeyed at the camera, and generally behaves for all the world like a Robinson imitator. The impression one gets is of a talented and promising but not yet really good actor having the time of his life with a tour-de-force scene, tossing all discipline out of the window. It is incredible to
realise that these overdone histrionics follow by a year the brilliant, powerful and generally underplayed Robinson performance of "Five Star Final". The second time around, even the back-projection seems excessive and inadequate. Presumably both Robinson and LeRoy, rushed by Warners from important films to programmers and back again, like most stars and contract directors of the period, just didn't care enough about "Two Seconds" to give it the care they realised it didn't deserve. But, this attitude really doesn't become apparent until that second viewing. Those of you seeing the film for the first time tonight will undoubtedly consider these notes a trifle harsh -- but since you'll be enjoying the film more on your first viewing than your projectionist on his fifth, perhaps it doesn't matter!

--- Intermission ---

"FIVE STAR FINAL" (First National, 1931) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy; screenplay by Byron Morgan from a play by Louis Weitzenkorn; camera - Sol Polito; 9 reels


Of all the gangster, newspaper and "social" melodramas of the early 30's that together form a kind of loose genre all their own, "Five Star Final" is far and away still one of the best - and least dated. Subject to a re-viewing, I suspect that "The Front Page" is still the best of its type, but this superb LeRoy film isn't far behind.

Unlike "Two Seconds", and despite a preponderance of dialogue, one hardly ever thinks of "Five Star Final" as having come from the stage. The giveaways are minor; the office boy, used for transitional scenes, and to "plant" necessary information, some of the faintly "stagey" curtain dialogue, as in the scene where H.B. Warner realises that he has been betrayed by the pseudo-minister. But these moments are few; for the rest the pacing is really dynamic, and what must have been a difficult and possibly tedious scene on stage (the mother trying desperately to get the managing editor on the phone) becomes simul taneously poignant and exciting thanks to some of the best utilisation of a split screen that I've ever seen.

There is the usual racy approach to sex and religion typical of the Warner films of this period, and some of the wisecracks (plus Robinson's marvellous closing line) must give the networks ulcers these days, but despite this limited comic element one never feels inclined to take "Five Star Final" as lightly as most of the other newspaper melodramas of those years. It's the grimmest and most uncompromising of the bunch, sharing the relentless tragedy of those two other LeRoy films, "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang" and "They Won't Forget".

The dialogue is top-drawer all the way, and the performances match it. Apfel, Ellis and Pratt are perfect as the money-grubbing editors, H.B. Warner superb as one of their victims, Karloff tremendously effective (if admittedly theatrical) as a former divinity student ousted from that profession for sexual degeneracy; Marion Marsh, as always, is pretty but hopelessly inadequate and outclassed by all the talent around her, and she just can't rise to the demands of her big climactic scene. But basically it's Robinson's show all the way, a superbly controlled performance, underplayed for the most part, but steadily building until it explodes in one of those rising crescendo curtain speeches that used to be so much a part of movies and theatre, and which have now all but disappeared -- largely for the want of actors like Robinson, Pat O'Brien and Lee Tracy to put them over. "Five Star Final" is one of his - and LeRoy's - best.

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-William K. Everson-

Next Tuesday: John Ford's ARROWSMITH (1931) - Colman, Helen Hayes, Myna Loy
NEWS ITEMS

We're glad to report that George Canham is now much better, and out of hospital. We saw him there a couple of times and he seemed reasonably happy (under the circumstances), catching up on his reading and watching old movies on tv (and under the bed-covers, after "Lights Out"). He thanks all his friends for their notes and cards, and hopes to be around and about again soon. His home address, for those who'd like to keep in touch, is 38 Fairview Avenue, Jersey City 4, NJ.

PLEASE make a point of catching "International House", playing at the New Yorker next Thursday through the following Friday. (Erratum: next Friday, through the following Thursday). It has some of Fields' funniest material, a great comic performance from Bela Lugosi, and a wild number from Cab Calloway's orchestra called "Reefer Man" that must drive the tv editors out of their minds. Fields has some great gags, slapstick as well as verbal, but our favorite has him peering - and ieering - through a keyhole and muttering "What won't they think of next?"!

We're still not quite sure what we'll be playing with "Ladies They Talk About", scheduled for two weeks from tonight. We'll announce the full show on next Tuesday's notes, or if you're not going to be at that show, drop me a postcard. Actually "Ladies They Talk About" is such enjoyable and stylish hokum that you'd be safe in taking a chance and coming along anyway, taking pot-luck on the supporting bill.

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NEXT TUESDAY:

"ARROWSMITH" (John Ford, 1931) with Ronald Colman, Helen Hayes, Myrna Loy
"CORSAIR" (Roland West, 1931) with Chester Morris, Fred Kohler, Thelma Todd

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