Tuesday next, February 11th: A light-hearted WB duo from the early 30's suddenly available again, Mervyn LeRoy's "BROAD-MINDED" (1931) with Joe E. Brown, Thelma Todd, Margaret Livingston, Bela Lugosi, Ona Munson, Wm. Collier jr., and "LADIES THEY TALK ABOUT" (1933), a crackling prison-confession melodrama not to be taken too seriously, but very much to be enjoyed -- with Barbara Stanwyck, Lillian Roth, Madame Sul Te Wan, Treston Foster, Lyle Talbot.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

February 5 1964

Two films from 1931

"CORSAIR" (Roland West Productions-United Artists, 1931)
Produced and directed by Roland West; screenplay by West and Josephine Lovett from the novel by Walton Green; photographed by Ray June; edited by Hal Kern; music by Alfred Newman; 7 reels.
Starring Chester Morris, with Allison Lloyd (Thelma Todd), Fred Kohler, Ned Sparks, Frank McHugh, Mayo Methot, Frank Rice, Emmett Corrigan, Al Hill, Gay Seabrook, Addie McPhail, William Austin.

Roland West is truly one of the most forgotten of all "forgotten" directors -- not least because almost all of his pictures seem to have totally disappeared from the face of the earth. Initially famous as the creator of pictorially elegant and engagingly tongue-in-cheek thrillers of the 20's -- "The Unknown Purple", "The Bat" (starring his wife, lovely former Griffith-girl Jewel Carmen) and Lon Chaney's "The Monster" -- he also made one of the best Norma Talmadge silents, "The Dove". Other than a 35mm print of "The Bat" rumored to be at large in the Mid-West, but never successfully tracked down, none of West's silents appear to have survived, certainly not in the sense that they are readily available. Of his three talkies (all with Chester Morris) the first and (if memory serves correctly) best, "Alibi", is available only for viewing in Hollywood. "The Bat Whispers", an early 70mm film, is a property now owned by Mary Pickford, and future theatrical or TV availability is thus unlikely. However, there are one or two 16mm prints available of this marvellously visual "old house" chiller. We ran it at this society a few years back, and hope to repeat one day. "Corsair", West's last talkie, is the least of the three perhaps, but it's a comparative "least", and still typical and top-notch West. When Thelma Todd (her appearance in this film under another name has never been officially explained) was found dead in her car, there was more than a hint of murder. And West, with whom Todd had had a long-standing romantic liaison, was one of the principal suspects. Murder was never actually proven, and thus West was cleared, but many still privately considered him guilty. He was out of films -- and until his death lived only on the fringe of Hollywood activity, as the proprietor of a restaurant.

Like most of West's films, "Corsair" doesn't make it easy on the audience. The plot development is far from straightforward, and the motivation often extremely involved. Many of the strongest plot elements are not present at all in the original novel -- a fairly routine tale of gangsterism and bootlegging, written by Walton Green, a prohibition inspector.

At a time when so many talkies were just that, "Corsair" is all movie, with a reliance on the same technique that so distinguished "The Bat Whispers" -- stylish pictorial elegance, with dramatic lighting and closeups, superbly smooth moving camera shots, an excellent use of shadows and silhouettes, and in this film some really lovely night exteriors. (How many times did they have to take that lighthouse shot, to get the sea gull flying past at just the right time?) The unit was based on Catalina, but the sea and landscapes are cunningly angled to suggest the less spectacular Eastern coastline, from New York down to Florida.
As a part of the gangster cycle of the early 30's, "Corsair" has something in common with "The Finger Points" in its casual acceptance of crime, and in its total lack of any kind of "moral compensation" for the criminals - even though their crimes have included cold-blooded murder. Chester Morris and Fred Kohler make an ideal pair of rival bootleggers, Ned Sparks gets a chance to give a more interesting characterisation than usual, and Thelma Todd has seldom looked so coolly beautiful. Last and far from least, there's a lovely period score by Newman.

--- INTERMISSION ---

"ARROWSMITH" (Sam Goldwyn-UA, 1931) Directed by John Ford; screenplay by Sidney Howard from the novel by Sinclair Lewis; camera - Ray June. Original running time: 108 minutes; running time of this print: 95 mins.


These notes may be a little sketchy (and thus a trifle unreliable) based, as they are, on memories of the last time I ran this print some five years ago. The print has developed a peculiar crack on each sprocket hole, and the only way to screen it without an incessant jumping of the image, is to hold the film in the projector gate, throughout its unreeeling, with one's finger. Rather like the boy and the Dutch dyke, though on a much higher and more important level of course! But in the interests of preserving the film (and my finger) it seemed best not to pre-screen the film prior to our regular show.

In 1931, the film was a huge success - both critically, and with the public. The reviews were unqualified raves. The boxoffice take was enormous. Both John Ford and Ronald Colman found themselves riding the crest of new and greater popularity. If the film no longer seems quite as important, as a film, it's still possible to understand its huge success as a star vehicle and as "popular" filmed literature. The early talkies after all, had completely fresh fields open to them in literary fields, and one-dimensional as many of those films were, they had a "bigness" and an important "feel" to them which doesn't seem to apply to current literary adaptations. No one really looks forward to "Teyton Place" or "The Prize" (except from a curiosity standpoint) just because they're based on best-sellers, ..., though admittedly there is also quite a gulf between Mr. Wallace and Miss Metallious, and those writers (Hemingway, Lewis, Bromfield, Douglas, Ferber, later on Steinbeck) who, whether they were good or merely popular, were nevertheless the giants (in one sense or the other) who provided Hollywood with so much of its source material in the 30s.

Like "Flesh", "Air Mail" and other 1931-34 Ford movies, "Arrowsmith" doesn't always look like a Ford movie. The game is given away sometimes by a player (Ward Bond), or a characteristic mating of sound and image (particularly in the jungle fever sequences), but on the whole this is more of a Goldwyn than a Ford movie -- and more of a Colman vehicle too. It's always a pleasure to watch him and to listen to him, but it isn't always too easy -- here -- to believe in him. His eager young medical student is entirely too assured and too polished to be convincing. However, it may be that subsequent memories of Rudolf Raseneydill and Robert Conway crowd us too much. In 1931, the Colman voice and other mannerisms would have been less pronounced, and though the performance would still have been a little too smooth, its impact on contemporary audiences must have been much greater. Helen Hayes however, once more confirms that she is one of the dullest and most over-rated actresses of them all. Anyone, from Peggy Moran to Lillian Gish, could have
brought a little more spontaneity and conviction to the role than Miss Hayes' "Look, I'm acting all the time!" type of performance. But Richard Bennett lends his customary authority and conviction to a key supporting role, and there are the usual fine cameos from old reliables like David Landau and Alec B. Francis.

Ray June (who also photographed "Corseain") gives the whole handsome production a typical Goldwyn gloss. Incidentally, the opening scene of wagons crossing a western skyline is taken from Goldwyn's silent "The Winning of Barbara Worth". There's one minor anachronism in the sets: near the end of the film, Colman enters a high, narrow skyscraper. The interior, however, spreads out in all directions, with a long horizontal corridor that disappears into infinity!

Our print runs about a reel short of the original release length, this footage having been deleted on the occasion of the film's last reissue in the 40's. Quite obviously what is missing is a substantial chunk of the Myrna Loy footage, as her role just doesn't make sense as it is. Although I saw the film in 1933, a couple of years after its release, I was perhaps a little too young at four years to appreciate the nuances of extra-marital amours, and thus have no recollection of the missing scenes. Curiously, others - who were older at the time - likewise cannot recall specific deleted scenes. The reviews of the time are no help, merely referring to Loy "as the woman who comes briefly into Arrowsmith's life as his wife is dying". Presumably the cuts were dictated merely by the much stricter code of the 40's -- a code which also prompted key cuts in some of the Paramount reissues of those years, such as "If I Had a Million" and "Klondike Annie". It's irritating, of course, but actually, apart from the jolt then caused by Colman's final meeting with Loy, it seems to do little harm to the continuity of the picture. One wonders how the picture would fare if reissued today; doubtless all the missing Loy footage would go back without a murmur, but the editors might get to work instead on some of the footage concerning white condescension to Negroes. In the jungle fever episode, Arrowsmith is aghast at the idea of experimenting on whites, but has no compunction at all about using the local natives as guinea pigs.

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Wm. K. Everson

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Coming programs:
February 18th: Paul Fejos' "Broadway" (1929); and shorts with Pearl White, Mary Pickford, Ben Turpin.

Coming in March/April ....

"The Mouthpiece" with Warren William ... Another "Disaster"/Stunt Man/2nd Unit Director compilation ... "Oh Mr. Porter!" ... a classic British comedy from the mid-30's, and best of the Will Hay vehicles ... "Kate Plus Ten", tongue-in-cheek adaptation of Edgar Wallace, with Jack Hulbert, Genevieve Tobin, Leo Genn ... "Dubarry" with Dolores Del Rio ...