October 27, 1964

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"I WAS AN ADVENTUER" (20th Century Fox, 1940) Dir: Gregory Ratoff
Ass. Prod: Numally Johnson; screenplay by Earl Tannberg, Don Ettlinger and John O'Hara from an original story by Gregor Rabinovitch; camera: Leon Shamroy and Edward Cronjager; editor: Francis D. Lyon; 9 reels.

The very antithesis of the New Wave rage, "I Was An Adventurer" is strictly formula, predictable and carefully pre-planned "merchandise" all the way -- and what a pleasure it is to see again such an expertly handled product. The story is so commonplace that one can easily ignore it, the better to concentrate on the glistening white marble decor, the elaborately constructed sets, the splendidly utilised standing ones, and the gliding, impressive camerawork of Shamroy and Cronjager. Movies have really lost a great deal when a fairly minor film like this which caused no stir on its initial release can now impress just on its technical proficiency -- to say nothing of the quite startling array of writers who whipped up this French one-lette. When there's an emotional scene, it's "big" in the grand old tradition -- rich in the love scene on the silhouetted rock, with the crashing white spray. And there's always some neat little bit of economising to hold the attention, as with the means of transferring Riviera long-shots of palm tree lined avenues in Pasadena. Richard Greene once more tries very ingratiatingly to be Colman and Robert Taylor rolled into one, and Zorina is rather better than she was later on. Her big scene with the Ballet however is one of the marvellous absurdities in all movie history; typical Hollywood soul culture, all gloss and vapidity, with design that somehow places a huge chandelier in the midst of a forest glade, giving us unfulfilled hopes that perhaps Stroheim is going to be hacking away at it as Chaney did! This most over-known of all ballets is also carefully introduced with a symphony to prevent any misunderstandings in case there are those who associate this music only with the main titles of early Universal horror films. But of course it's Stroheim and Lorre all the way, the latter with his genial psychopathology, and Stroheim with his seething venom, stealing scenes with ease just by fumbling his cane or jabbing his head backwards when he takes a drink, or really making sure of things by pulling out a tiny pair of scissors and cutting the frayed edges of his shirt-cuffs! He has some of the best lines too, and considerately, the romantic nonsense is disposed of soon enough for Vom and Lorre to get the last sequence of the film to themselves. The print by the way is flawless; how I wish they were all like this!

"MASSACRE" (First National, 1934) Director: Alan Crosland
Camera: George Barnes; screenplay by Ralph Block and Sheridan Gibney from a story by Robert E. Sherwood; editor: Terry Morey; 8 reels

A real gem and a rediscovery of note, "Massacre" is quite the best of the three Barthelmess "social" films we've shown this month -- although "Heroes For Sale" did play rather better with an audience than I gave it credit for in the notes. As in "Heroes For Sale", the framework is melodramatic, and as in Lang's "You Only Live Once", the scales are loaded -- perhaps overloaded. But since its story hardly claims to have documentary characteristics, and since, like "The Vanishing American", the story is a darned good one, the social overtones come as something of a bonus and one is quite surprised at their power, if not entirely convinced by it all, although it certainly works far far better than Curtis' weeding of melodrama and social criticism in "Mountain Justice". There is some lovely camerawork, striking images, much laughter and commentary (it colored value with carefully-processed cracks about indians!) some fine mob scenes, and some unusually-laid chosen locations, ranging from good old nearby Chatsworth to that stark solitary tree in the middle of a vast plain that DeHilfe (in "The Plainsman" and others have used to excellent effect. Once more it's a confirmation of what a powerful and visually dynamic director Alan Crosland was, and it raises again the question of what REALLY happened to him after his first two or three excellent (and very mobile) talkies, Hal Mohr, who photographed many of his films, merely hedged and changed the subject EVERY time I asked, so presumably it was a personal (drinking) problem. He was killed in an auto wreck, but his son, a former editor, now directs, too.