"DANCING MOTHERS" (Paramount, 1926) Produced and directed by Herbert Brenon; scenario by Forrest Halsey from the play by Edgar Selwyn and Edmund Goulding; camera: Roy Hunt; 5 reels.

With Alice Joyce, Clara Bow, Conway Tearle, Norman Trevor, Donald Keith, Leila Hyams, Dorothy Cummings, Eisle Lawson, Spencer Charters, Matt McHugh (extra).

Superficially a disappointment perhaps, in that the title combined with Clara Bow suggests a wild flapper yarn in the "Our Dancing Daughters" tradition, "Dancing Mothers" is actually a generally quiet and rather thoughtful little film that holds up extremely well, and certainly reflects the uncertain moralities of the times more accurately than most of the flaming youth epics. As a play (which opened in August of 1924) it had been considered hackneyed and already rather old-fashioned, but was saved for most of the critics by the decidedly off-beat ending. As a film, it stands the test of time rather better, for in faithfully retaining the plot and much of the dialogue of the play, it achieves a kind of honesty that was usually sidestepped in movies of this type in the 20's. The tug-of-war between pre-War Victorian standards and post-War demands for sophistication and "freedom" were usually wrapped up in neat little packages about the girl who pretends to be a wanton, but, unbesmirched, finally settles for the old values after all. "Dancing Mothers," while admittedly never too profound, does suggest that the old values at least need a little overhauling, while the new ones warrant cautious consideration. It also suggests that maybe the sanctity of the home is not the be-all and end-all of existence, and that European liberalism was a kind of Utopia to which too fortunate could escape. As a kind of unwitting sociological document, carrying on in a straight line from "A Fool There Was," "True Heart Susie," "The Sheik" and "Foolish Wives," "Dancing Mothers" is a valuable record of changing morals and mores.

As a film, though seemingly of less importance than such immediately prior Brenon films as "Peter Pan," "A Kiss for Cinderella" and "Beau Geste," it is still unabashedly stylish. The sets are handsome, though apart from a bizarre Greenwich Village night club in pirate décor, there are no real stunners. The camerawork is expert, but unshowy. Yet despite a preponderance of long dialogue exchanges, notice how Brenon keeps it from seeming too much like a photographed play. There are a lot of intricate exits and entrances, with characters missing one another, hiding, confronting, and so on - and yet it all seems effortless and natural, without the stage-managed churl-like quality one might expect. Too, some of the big emotional and dramatic scenes are resolved or climaxed by long-held and well under-played closeups, specifically of Alice Joyce and Clara Bow.

Clara Bow is quite fine as Kittens, although perhaps her pep and vivacity - especially in the scene where she invades Conway Tearle's apartment - make the character a shade too likeable. No villainess certainly (Helen Hayes played the role on the stage) Kittens is nevertheless shallow and selfish; yet for the most part one's sympathies seem to be with her, and it is only the reactions of others that make one realize she is really somewhat of a brat! Alice Joyce gives a dignified and restrained performance, and indeed none of the acting dates at all. Every performance is quite valid today, which is perhaps another reason why it isn't quite the "fun" picture that the title and genre might lead one to expect. However, this comment is by way of amplification and not apology, for "Dancing Mothers" is one of those good "little" films that seems to grow in stature every time one sees it, and in time it may well prove to be one of the most durable of all the "jazz age" sagas.

INTERMISSION
"ORCHIDS AND ERMINE" (First National, 1927) Directed by Alfred Santell; presented by John McCormick; photographed by George J. Folsey; story and scenario, Carey Wilson; comedy construction, Merwyn LeRoy. 5 reels.
With Colleen Moore, Jack Mulhall, Sam Hardy, Gwen Lee, Mickey Rooney, Jack Duffy, Hedda Hopper, Fred Kelsey, Frank Hagney, Kate Price, Brooks Benedict.

The very antithesis of "Dancing Mothers", "Orchids and Ermine" is a typically gay Cinderella story of the flapper era, with few surprises in the plot, but plenty of surprises - and delightful ones - in terms of incident. Few things date quite as much as the wisecrack titles of flapper comedies -- many of them must have seemed impossibly labored even at the time -- but here again, "Orchids and Ermine" enchants. The titles, most of them at least, are pithy and witty, and have all the punch of the spoken word.

"Orchids and Ermine" is one of the last of the gentle, sophisticated comedies of the silents - and is also one of Colleen Moore's best vehicles. Apart from its fast pace and inventive humor, it is constantly appealing and charming. All of the characters - even the cheats and the money-grubbers - are rather likeable, and the film has none of the underlying hardness of such more recent "gold-digger" comedies as "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" or "How to Marry a Millionaire" (the two contemporary examples we cited when we last played "Orchids and Ermine") or more currently, "Kiss Me, Stupid". It's frightening to realize that we've already reached an era where "How to Marry a Millionaire" seems to belong to the good old tradition of teaseful comedy!

"Orchids and Ermine" has so much to offer, not least - to New Yorkers especially - in the long sequences shot in and around the Plaza Hotel, and atop a 5th Avenue bus. What matter if the studio-filmed "matching" inserts just don't match! The film effortlessly catches a certain milieu of the 20's, and if it's a milieu that seems somewhat at odds with that offered by "Dancing Mothers", it hardly matters; after all, there is as much truth in daydreams as in the harsh realities.

The film was made during director Santell's peak period, when he was deftly turning out such diverse works as "The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come" and "The Patent Leather Kid". Some of his films of the 30's - "Folly of the Circus", "Winteriet" - were likewise interesting, although his later efforts, "Beyond the Blue Horizon", "The Hairy Ape" - were rather disappointing. But despite the slick direction, Mickey Rooney's marvellous film debut as an ultra-self-confident midget, the relaxed playing from the whole cast and those insolent subtitles, "Orchids and Ermine" really clicks so well because of the charm and personality of its star, Colleen Moore. The port little star with one blue eye and one brown, something of a combination of Clara Bow and Betty Bronson, was a good little dramatic actress too ("Lilac Time" apart, perhaps?) in both earlier silents and later talkies. But it was in these gay little trifles that she really shone, and it is too bad that "Orchids and Ermine" and "Ella Cinders" are the only Moore vehicles generally available to us today. Those of you who enjoyed all of those lovely 35mm original prints in the Museum's private Saturday morning series a few years back, don't need to be sold on the merits of Colleen Moore in such delights as "Sally", "Come On Over" and "So Long Letty". Perhaps one day more of these will become available ... in the meantime, it's fortunate that so good and representative a film as "Orchids and Ermine" exists outside archival walls to delight us, and to confirm that her fantastic boxoffice popularity in the 20's was well-deserved.

Wm.K.Everson