A PROGRAM OF SENTIMENT & MELODRAMA FROM THE EARLY 30's

"TERROR ABOARD" (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Paul Sloane 7 reels
Screenplay: Harvey Thew, Manuel Seff; camera: Harry Fischbeck

"Terror Aboard" came into our hands at a most propitious time. Frankly not important enough to have been scheduled in the regular way, it is at the same time entirely too much fun to be shunted aside and not shown. Since we had deliberately left part of tonight's program open to accommodate transient material, it fits the bill rather nicely as a kind of unheralded bonus, and also helps to balance Mr. Barrie's sentiment a little.

An enjoyable old-fashioned mystery-thriller, with undertones of horror, "Terror Aboard" gets under way admirably with some fine atmospheric photography (by Harry Fischbeck, one of Paramount's best and most underrated cameramen) in a sequence that is a complete and blatant steal from "Beau Geste". Complete even to the mysteriously sudden fire, and a lone survivor escaping, it uses the construction of that earlier film by opening on a note of mystery and seemingly unexplainable situations, and then flashes back to correct chronology to trace the events leading up to the events already shown. In the process there is a little more borrowing, including a reference to the whole basic plot-line of "Grandma's Boy", and some fine bank crash stock footage lifted from Frank Capra's "American Madness". The plot soon resolves itself into a kind of "Ten Little Indians" in reverse, with the characters being killed off one by one, the only difference being that the audience is fully aware of the identity of the killer.

Perhaps because it was, after all, only a "B" programmer, and directed by a hack, it never quite fulfills the promise of its tense opening sequence.
For one thing, it is all a little too full-blooded, and one tends to treat it all as a lark; since one never really takes it seriously enough to care who "gets" him next, suspense isn't its strongest point. Then, surprisingly, there is a little too much of Charlie Buggles, who is usually tremendous with good material, and very funny indeed with adequate material, but who is here fighting a losing battle against no material at all. He has his moments and works like a trapper, but the lines and situations just aren't there. However, it's nice to see that Leila Bennett who was always being stuck in these thrillers for comedy relief, and never did anything but slow up the action and emerge unscathed, here does get herself killed off in due time! The cast is full of old reliables from the 30's and it's an odd coincidence that Shirley Grey should be the heroine, since she was to go through exactly the same kind of thing a couple of years later opposite Bela Lugosi in "The Mystery of the Marie Celeste", a British thriller retitled "The Phantom Ship" in this country.

The various methods of murder are ingenious and well-assorted, and that fine and ultra-suave player John Halliday has a field-day playing a Tod Slaughter role with a Sydney Greenstreet urbanevity. His highspot is undoubtedly locking Verree Teasdale in the ship's freezer and trotting off to his next victim with a jaunty mock shiver! His is a delightful performance, and quite the best single thing in a minor but most enjoyable piece of thick-ear hokum.

= INTERMISSION =
"SEVEN DAYS' LEAVE" (Paramount 1929, released 1930) Directed by Richard Wallace and John Cromwell; screenplay by John Farrow and Don Toller from "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" by James M. Barrie; camera: Charles Lang; edited by George Nicholls Jr.; title: Richard Digges Jr. 8 reels.


"Seven Days' Leave" is one of those curious films that has no "official" reputation, but that is well and fondly remembered by everybody who saw it on its initial release. Because of its rather typical transition-to-sound staginess, it has never been officially reissued, and it has taken tv's pattern of mass revivals to bring it into the light of day again. It's good to see that it's still a poignant and moving film; not a great film perhaps, but in its own way, a minor classic.

James Barrie always walked a very delicate tightrope that held his pathos, whimsy and sentiment sufficiently in check so that it never became maudlin or cloying. For me, "Seven Days' Leave" works beautifully; it is moving and tasteful, well written and well played. But inevitably, whether it works for you depends on your own feelings about Barrie; those who dislike him per se will probably find it rough going. Although a lesser work, it is in many ways a companion piece to his classic "A Kiss for Cinderella", so beautifully filmed by Paramount in 1925. Both stories use the unspectacular "home front" of World War One as the background for timeless themes that could belong to any period. Both stories too are played off via rather off-beat protagonists -- the dull yet sensitive policeman and the little slavey in "A Kiss for Cinderella", the ne'er do well soldier and the little old lady in "Seven Days' Leave". There is a very close affinity between Cooper's soldier and Tom Moore's policeman, but of course many of Barrie's characters reappear in different guises throughout his works.

"Seven Days' Leave" gets off to a good start which suggests that it may be unusually cinematic for a 1929 film, but while it soon settles down to lengthy talk sessions in the manner of the stage, and certainly never approaches the filmic invention of say "Applause", also of '29, at the same time it is far more than just filmed theatre. Beryl Mercer, repeating her stage role, is fine, and Cooper, his performance uneven but helped by his natural awkwardness, does fairly well. But it is the decor and the supporting players that really steal all the honors. The detail of London streets, music halls, hot-potato vendors and the like is flawlessly created, and Tempe Pigott's performance as "the Haggerty woman" is nothing short of a masterpiece. Curiously, Basil Radford -- who must have been recruited from some touring British play -- turns up in a small role. "Seven Days' Leave" is almost a great film, and perhaps with a Borzage directing, it might have been. Directorially it follows the pattern of the day by having a stage director (Cromwell) assist in the handling of the actors, while subordinate to the actual director, Richard Wallace. Wallace had just scored a big hit with "Shopworn Angel", but was to remain one of those versatile directors who always showed great promise, but never really came through with more than interestingly off-beat pictures -- ranging from "Eight Girls in a Boat", "The Masquerader" and "The Young in Heart" to "The Fallen Sparrow".

ANNOUNCEMENT AND/OR "WARNING": Next week's LES MISERABLES is in many ways a remarkable film, more advanced in its techniques than most of the other circa 1912 features that we've run. However, it is still a "primitive" and with its rather harsh print quality and French titles, remains of primarily academic interest. We hope you'll come -- and like it -- but it is largely for those who like to study early film, and not for those who seek entertainment values alone. It's a rare and rewarding piece, but it will certainly not be everybody's cup of tea.