Tuesday next, Sept. 28th. A program of Americana: PECK'S BAD BOY (1921, Sam Wood) with Jackie Coogan; THE NEW SCHOOLTEACHER (1923, Gregory LaCava) with Chico Sale.

Notice: Last week Henri Langlois of the Cinemateque Francaise announced the cancellation of the planned mammoth retrospective at the Gallery of Modern Art, so our warning that part of our current 3-month schedule might be cancelled in order to facilitate attendance at those daily screenings, can now be disregarded.

Tuesday September 21st 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A Program of Mystery and Horror


Although I understand that it is considered a disappointment by those to whom William Stone's original novel is something of a masterpiece of subtle horror, "The Devil Commands" is nevertheless by far the best of the quartet of horror films that Karloff made for Columbia in 1939-40. (The other three, in order of merit, were "Before I Hang," "The Man They Could Not Hang" and "The Man With Nine Lives"). Its story-line, regardless of how much it deviates from the original, is certainly the least hackneyed of the group, and its director, Dmytryk, manages to give it far more style than Nick Grinde was able to impart to the other three.

It's traditional horror stuff of course; there's the standard lonely old house on the windswept cliff, the weird machines, and the expected underplayed lines about man not being meant to tamper with the forces of nature, etc. Yet it all seems to pay off in spite of itself; the story does make reasonable sense, the characters are less cliche than usual, and the laboratory scenes are genuinely weird and terrifying. One scene in which a maidservant is accidentally locked in with the suddenly activated machinery is particularly strong and well done. Certainly as a film it has far more life and movement than many of the more recent Edward Dmytryk movies.

It's strange how the films of different companies have recognisable physical qualities which make them immediately identifiable. During the war years, Paramount printed most of their black-and-white features on a kind of washed out, non-contrast stock which made the visual quality of their product recognisably second-rate. In westerns, Columbia's gun-shot effects had a thick, booming quality as compared to the sharp, staccato gun shots over at Republic. And Columbia Be usually had a "seedy" kind of decor and camerawork, as opposed to the all-seeing "A"s like "Gilda", which utilised top cameramen such as Rudy Mate. This seedy quality is to a degree evident in "The Devil Commands" -- Karloff seems to be using old studio clothes rather than his own, his makeup (even when he isn't meant to be somewhat of a physical wreck) is careless, and the camerawork hardly shows him to advantage. He looks ten years older here than in a contemporary Universal horror film, "Black Friday". It's a pity that a little more production care wasn't given to "The Devil Commands"; for it could have turned out to be a superior job. Nevertheless, the good story, Karloff's performance and Dmytryk's direction certainly get the very most out of the limited budget, and a measure of its effectiveness is that one always tends to take it reasonably seriously -- even when Karloff strapes his frightened daughter to a chair and surrounds her with weird machines and sundry corpses, and tells her casually to relax and not be nervous!

-- Intermission --

"THE BAT WHISPERERS" (United Artists, 1930; re: 1931) Written, produced and directed by Roland West; based on the stage play by Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood, as produced by Wagenhals and Kemper, photographed by Ray June; photography of wide-screen version, settings designed and executed by Paul Eco Crawford; production assistants, Roger H. Heaton, Ned Mann, Charles H. Smith, Helen Hallett; edited by James Smith; in charge of sound, J.T. Reed; sound technician, O.A. Legerstrom, 8 reels.

The Cast (in order of appearance): Polite Lies (Chance Ward); Mrs. Ball (Richard Thorner); Butler (Wilson Bergan); Police Captain (DeLutt Jennings); Sergeant (Sidney D'Albrook); Man in the Black Mask (S.E. Jennings); Cornelia van Gorder (Grayce Hampton); Lizzie Allen (Naude Ehurne); The Caretaker (Spencer Charter); Dale Van Gorder (Une Merkel); Brook (William Bakewell); Doctor Vannes (Gustav von Seyffertitz); Detective Anderson (Chester Morris); Richard Fleming (Hugh Huntley); Detective Jones (Charles Don Clark); The Unknown (Ben Bard).
t has been over eight years since our first showing of "The Bat Whispers" at this society. In the interim it hasn't seen the light of day at all; Mary Pickford owns the film, and several prints repose in her vault, including some 65mm copies, since it was made as part of the short-lived wide-screen cycle in the early days of sound. Since a very anemic remake with Vincent Price was made by Allied Artists a few years ago, it now seems unlikely that this original will ever be revived for theatre or TV. In order to protect this print and keep showing it to a minimum we haven't re-screened it, and the show is therefore a follow-up based largely on our notes of May 1957. I have updated them in terms of additional information, but reappraisal of the picture will have to await tonight's show, however, there seems no reason to assume that our initial enthusiasm will have lessened any. At that time, we were quite overwhelmed by it. Expecting good, stylish "The Cat and the Canary" type fare, we were absolutely bowled over by the marvellous stuff it contains.

West's first version of "The Bat", made as a silent, was a huge success. It starred Jack Pickford, Sojin and one of the loveliest of the Griffith girls, Jewel Carmen - who, incidentally, was Mrs West. This talkie remake however was somewhat of a flop commercially. In an era when movies were expected to talk and do little else, and when transplanted stage plays were all the vogue, especially at UA and 20th, this stage adaptation broke all the rules. It remained determinedly a movie rather than a talkie. Its stage origins are apparent in some of the rather irksome comedy - which isn't helped by occasionally sub-standard sound on the print - but otherwise it tells its story entirely visually, in the best tradition of the silent greats. As such, in 1931, it probably seemed quite old-fashioned and then a wet blanket; today, like so many ignored films of that period, it seems wonderfully fresh and invigorating. Oh, for some of its style and imagination in today's films!

As an old-school "old house" thriller it has some plot similarities of course, and more than casual resemblances to "The Gorilla", "The Cat and the Canary", "The 13th Guest" (which copied one whole sequence from it) and "The Old Dark House". But even the cliches seem fresh here, and West deliberately kids the plot which seems littleorny to him. And recognizing that it is basically a "fun" film, he doesn't concern himself too much with logic. If he likes a pictorial effect, he uses it, and to blazes with trying to explain or justify it. Throughout there are tremendous, stylistic visuals; great moving camera shots, ingenious miniatures, strikingly dramatic lighting and compositions, fantastic and effective angles. A remarkable bank-robery scene is done almost in an impressionistic manner, shot at a distorted high angle, and reminiscent of Fritz Lang in his best days. A black robed gang smirking out a candle is a happy borrowing from Lang's "Metropolis" too. In fact, pictorially the film often reminds one of Lang and Maurice Tourneur, but it is never lazily imitative. Some of the pictorial effects - the great bat shadow melting into nothing for example - are among the most striking images that the film thriller has ever created.

Roland West was obviously a dynamic and individual filmmaker, who was lucky enough to be independently wealthy and something of a dilettante about film. He made only nine films in 14 years, and he made them just as he wanted. An actor, and playwright, he liked to use players from the stage as much as possible, and if he thought a man had flair and talent, he'd use it, regardless of lack of experience. His art director on "The Bat Whispers" for example was formerly a UA studio draughtsman. His films were all one-man-shows, and always cost more than they should have done because of his habit of building the maximum number of sets to ensure camera mobility and variety, and because he almost always shot at night, starting in the early evening and knocking off just before dawn. He made a completely successful transfer from silent movies to sound, although dialogue does sound a little archaic even today. His plots are always seemed to be in unexplained motives and characters, and like Pabst, he never seemed too concerned about his audience as long as he knew what he wanted. His three talkies were all fine melodramas starring Chester Morris - "Alibi" (unfortunately not available), "The Bat Whispers", and his last, "Gosain", an interesting gangster film which we have shown. None of his silent material seems to be available, although there is a generous chunk of his Lon Chaney horror spoof "The Monster" in Robert Youngson's upcoming compilation of all Chaney films. His career ended in a sudden end in the mid-'30s when he was implicated in, and suspected of, the murder of Thumen Todd. (She was his leading lady in "Gosain", and also apparently his mistress). Though never proven, doubts remained, and his movie career was at an end. He spent the rest of his days in Hollywood as both a curiosity and an enigma -- and, quite incidentally, a prosperous restauranteur.

"The Bat" is still an old reliable for Summer stock theatres, and until her death, Zasu Pitts toured with it in the comedy-maid role. Ray June's camerawork is so stunning that one would love to see the effects in this wide-screen version. The editing, by the way, is by James Smith -- D.W. Griffith's old cutter, and the only one on whom he placed real reliance.

WM. Z. EVenson