Tuesday, February 15th: The longest extant print of Abel Gance's legendary "LA ROUE" (1922). One of the rarest items we've ever shown.

Tuesday February 8 1956
Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Films from the early 30's

"THE HOUSE ON 56th STREET" (Warner Brothers) (1933) Director: Robert Florey Scenariol by Austin Parker and Sheridan Gibney from a story by Joseph Santley; camera: Ernest Haller; Dialogue Director, William Keighley; edited by Howard Bretherton; 7 reels.

With Kay Francis, Gene Raymond, Ricardo Cortez, Margaret Lindsay, William Bond, John Halliday, Frank McHugh, Sheila Terry, Henry O'Neill, Theodore Newton, Nella Walker, Hardie Albright, Walter Walker, Lloyd Whitlock, Leo White, Frank Darion, Olaf Hytten, Wilfrid Lucas, Charles Davis, Jack Hower, Philip Reed, Dennis O'Keefe.

Clearly a derivation from "Madame X" (as were so many tear-jerkers in the early 30's) "The House on 56th Street" is the kind of vehicle one would expect to see Barbara Stanwyck or Ruth Chatterton suffering through rather than Kay Francis. Hardy a masterwork, it is nevertheless a fine example of Florey's talent for fashioning silk celluloid out of saw's hokum. Florey never really fulfilled all the promise of his better achievements, and perhaps he did achieve his zenith within the freedom of medium-budgeted programmers. Had he been promoted to grade-A productions he might well have trodden the stodgy and pretentious path that the once lively Robert Wise has chosen to follow. For all of its old-fashioned hokum, "The House on 56th Street" has both pace and craftsmanship. It covers a tremendous amount of time, ground and scope in its story-line, and zips along like an express train so that when it is all over, it's hard to realize that Warners and Florey have crammed so much into a film of less than 70 minutes! II's possible that the film was clearly going to be no block-buster, and that cuts were made either during or after production, but it seems more likely that, like so many Warner scripts, the film was written with a view to getting things moving as quickly as possible. A whole plot complication involving the hero's aristocratic mother—a situation that MGM would have milked for at least a couple of reels—is side-stepped by a couple of lines of dialogue, and is disposed of almost before it exists! Margaret Lindsay arrives late in the proceedings, and almost right away is reduced from a dewy-eyed debutante to a Jeanne Moreau-ish wreck of a gambling fiend! And yet, within, the speed never produces the look of a quickie. The camerawork is polished, and scenic break-up into powerful and well-timed close-ups and two-shots. The story, old-fashioned or not, is a pretty good one, with a meaty if predictable climax, and the acting is certainly well above the level one has a right to expect from a programmer. Kay Francis is beautiful and noble once more, but as always—and who ever stood a chance against him?—it is John Halliday who walks away with the whole show with the kind of role he could do in his sleep, but always managed to perform as though he'd never heard of type-casting.

"MONTE CARLO" (Paramount, 1930) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch Scenariol by Ernest Vajda and Vincent Lawrence, based on "The Blue Coast" by Hans Mueller and an episode from "Monsieur Beaucaire" by Booth Tarkington and Evelyn Sutherland; camera: Victor Milner; 9 reels

With Jeanette MacDonald, Jack Buchanan, Zasu Pitts, Tyler Brooke, Claude Allister, Lionel Belmore, John Roche, Alberti Conti, Donald Novis, Helen Garden, David Percy, Billy Bevan.

With the exception of "The Sailing Lieutenant" (still admirable, long held up for legal reasons, soon to be available again) "Monte Carlo" is the least known and least revived of the early Lubitsch talkies. It opens beautifully and visually, with piquant sex farce and Miss MacDonald singing "Beyond the Blue Horizon" aboard a train—nay, as legend has told us, in perfect unison with rhythmical cutting, but nevertheless with such charm as the brand and such disregard for its dramatic or musical necessity, that we have high hopes for the rest of the film. And the images are never quite fulfilled, and despite charm and typical Lubitsch "touche" in terms of pantomimic comedy, it remains one of his lesser efforts. But a "lessor Lubitsch" from his best period is still something to treasure, and "Monte Carlo" certainly is an enjoyable frolic, despite rather disappointing (dupe) picture quality. Jack Buchanan, a delight in his own rather more British brand of musical comedy, doesn't quite fit into the Maurice Chevalier mould that Lubitsch seeks to pour him into here, but it's hardly his fault. It's still an engaging performance, and it is perhaps only years of retrospective viewing that makes us see Maurice and his straw hat beneath that conservative if breezy British exterior.

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EXTRA: A transmittable print, added to next week's show—screened last

WB's "Central Park" (1922, John Adolphit) — 57 mins of Joan Blondell.