Tuesday Oct. 18th: "THE DEVIL HORSE" (1926) with Takoma Camutt; condensations of two remarkable films from the late 20's, Volkoff's "CASANOVA" with Mosjoukine, and Graham Cutts' "CONFETTI" with Jack Buchanan; and Sennett's "THE PULLMAN BRIDE" with Gloria Swanson, Chester Conklin, Phyllis Haver.

Tuesday Oct. 11 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

In the past we have often espoused the cause of the contract star and director system of the 30's; if the methods were those of the assembly line and the factory, the well-oiled teamwork nevertheless was responsible for an amazing number of high-quality "A" programmers, and even "B" films. Movies like "Massacre", "Jewel Robbery", "The Narrow Corner" and "Cabin in the Cotton" more than justified the methods that produced them. But there is of course another side to the coin too, and tonight's program flips that coin. Neither of tonight's films could even remotely be placed in the "accidental gem" category along with the afore-mentioned titles. Both films were made purely and simply because the companies had to grind out product, and because there were stars, directors and cameramen under contract who had to be kept busy. Since this society has always been more devoted to the truth of film than to its art, we need hardly apologise for showing them. In any case, since our regular Bulletin made it fairly plain that these films were just program-fodder, we doubt that any of you are here with false hopes. Viewed in the right perspective, they're still interesting and enjoyable films.

"ANOTHER DAWN" (Warner Brothers, 1937) Directed by William Dieterle
Original story and screenplay: Laird Doyle; camera: Tony Gaudio;
Music: Erich Wolfgang Korngold; Dialogue director, Stanley Logan; 8 rls

With "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and "Captain Blood" behind him, Flynn was now established as one of Warners' major stars, and in 1937 they sought to consolidate this popularity by displaying him in four films of moderate cost and considerable variety, ranging from another swashbuckler ("The Prince and the Pauper") to modern comedy ("The Perfect Specimen") and two romantic/dramatic vehicles, "The Green Light" and "Another Dawn". The system worked, and the following year Warners were able to tailor roles more specifically to the Flynn image with "Robin Hood" and "The Dawn Patrol". Actually, as the result of an iron-bound contract, Kay Francis gets top billing in "Another Dawn", but her star was waning and she was now of far less importance to Warners than the fast rising Flynn.

"Another Dawn" is awful or great, depending on one's viewpoint, but either way it is vastly entertaining novelette slurp, beautifully typical of the period, when such triangular plot-lines could be sketched out on the back of an envelope and readily adapted to a dozen different players and locations. It's an economy production all the way, utilising left-over sets from "The Charge of the Light Brigade", and keeping its action-content to small-scale skirmishing or off-screen entirely, to be reported over the radio! Nevertheless, it's a slick and handsome production. The sets are lush, and Tony Gaudio's gleaming, gliding camerawork makes them look like a million dollars, Korngold's score is another major asset. Locations - which include at least one from "Son of the Sheik" - are convincing, even if they are practically on Hollywood's doorstep. The plot-line brings in all the anticipated romantic and dramatic cliches of the Indian frontier, with the three leads being magnificently noble and honorable, and Herbert Mundin redeeming his white feather in the traditional fashion. Love scenes are played out against a shimmering backdrop of a moon, the loveliest and the
phoniest since the Barrymore-Costello love scenes in "The Sea Beast". Flawlessly typecast, with Mary Forbes once again the epitome of aristocracy, the film perhaps scores best on its consistently larger-than-life dialogue, marvellously florid in the romantic areas, absurdly underplayed in a pseudo-British fashion at other times. One memorable chunk of dialogue has one of the characters discussing on the great love of Francis' life, an aviator whom she loved passionately, and who died at the height of his fame in a crash. After envying him the dramatic sweep of his death, he adds as a casual after-thought, "Bit rough on her, of course".

--- Intermission ---

"DOUBTING THOMAS" (Fox, 1935) Directed by David Butler; produced by B.G. DeSylva; Screenplay by William Conselman from the play "The Torch Bearers" by George Kelly; Camera: Joseph Valentine; 7 reels

Although it was always considered one of the lesser Rogers vehicles, "Doubting Thomas" was a popular film; I recall seeing it as a child and audiences reacted with laughter and enthusiasm throughout. Today alas, it falls very flat, and one can only assume that Rogers' enormous popularity helped carry anything he did in those days. Just as Antonioni makes films about boring people and comes up with boring movies, so this film deals with a bunch of amateurs putting on a hack play — and emerges as being almost equally hack and undistinguished itself. The play rehearsals, with their inevitable mishaps, seem to go on far too long until one realises, with some mild horror, that they are to comprise the bulk of the film. Will Rogers plays a decidedly passive role, coming into his own as a player only in the final reel. For the most part the story and the characters bounce off him — and the film commits the cardinal audience-sympathy-losing sin of having him sit around making so-called witty remarks on the proceedings, remarks which might be tolerable if his companions didn't break down into peals of laughter at every line he utters! Like canned laughter on today's TV shows, nothing is more calculated to make one want NOT to laugh! There is a curious lethargy to Rogers' performance too, and an obvious lack of interest in what is going on — e.g., in closeups he obviously reacts as the director tells him to, but in long-shots (especially in the theatre scenes) he reacts as the crowd reacts — which is just what he should NOT be doing. The non-matching in the cuts from closeup to long-shot is thus quite spectacular at times.

Having slammed the film quite soundly — and it is, I think, the weakest of his sound films — let us add that there are redeeming features. The film is fairly short; the antics of so many character players — Andrew Tombes etc. — in substantial roles is often quite rewarding; John Qualen's last-reel spoof on an arty Hollywood director (clearly Josef von Sternberg) is quite amusing; Billie Burke is as charming as always; and there's another slick comedy performance by T. Roy Barnes, once again and admirably cast as a fast-talking con man. If he doesn't have the material that he had in Fields' "It's a Gift" (where he was trying to locate one Karl T. LaFong), he still has the same peppy personality, and he brings it to bear with a vengeance on not too enterprising material. If "Doubting Thomas" is disappointing as a Rogers film, it is also illuminating as to the dangers of the old star system whereby quite unsuitable material was often foisted on to major talents just to keep them busy in between assignments specifically tailored to them. But in other respects, "Doubting Thomas" is not a "cheater"; it's well enough mounted, with production values on a par with those of the other Rogers films; directorial attempts are made to get it out of doors and away from its stage origins, and everybody involved tries hard .... even a little too hard. Perhaps that's the trouble — with everybody so determined to be funny, there's little room left for spontaneous charm and humor to emerge by itself.