January 28 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"REUNION IN VIENNA" (RKO, 1933) EXCERPTS: 2 reels
Director: Sidney Franklin
Screenplay by Ernest Vajda and Claudine West from the Theatre Guild play by Robert E. Sherwood; Music: William Axt; original length: 10 rls
With John Barrymore, Diana Wynyard, Frank Morgan, Robson.

Now completely withdrawn from even tv distribution because the story rights have reverted to the Sherwood estate, "Reunion in Vienna" joins "Night Flight" as one of the major missing RKO talkies. That these two films, which are now owned by MGM are missing only for legal reasons, and not because no printing material exists, is some but minor compensation. The end result is the same: the films cannot be seen. These rather frustrating two reels are in no way a condensation, but rather two complete highlight sequences, satisfying in themselves because they are such good theatre, but nevertheless tantalizing in their reminder that another 8 reels are denied to us. Still, it's always good to see Barrymore, Diana Wynyard and Frank Morgan at their prime, the staging is elegant, and the dialogue witty, so we can at least be thankful for the chance to see these representative excerpts.

"THE BOWERY" (20th Century-United Artists, 1933) Director: Raoul Walsh
Screenplay by James Gleason and Howard Estabrook from a story by Bassie Bogos Soloman and Michael L. Simmons; Camera: Barney McGill; 9 reels
With Wallace Beery, George Raft, Jackie Cooper, Fay Wray, Pert Kelton, George Walsh, Oscar Apfel, Herman Bing, Ferdinand Munier, Harold Huber, Fisher Horton, Lillian Harner, Tammany Young, Esther Kuir, John Bleifer, John Kelly, Heinie Conklin, Irving Bacon, Kit Guard, Bobby Dunn, Andrew Tomba.

Up until the early '50s at least, "The Bowery" used to make fairly regular appearances on 42nd Street, but it has been absent now for a decade or more. And while available for television, its exposure there has been relatively minor, probably because of the problems it poses in so-called "offensive" situations where minority groups are concerned. Since the Chinese, the Jews and the Negroes are all clobbered within the first four minutes of film- ing time, it's easy to see how the average tv public relations director and editor would give it all up as a bad job, and slip in an nth run of "The Great American Broadcast" instead.

Both are 1933 releases, but "The Bowery" is about as far removed in taste and elegance from "Reunion in Vienna" as in fact Third Avenue is removed from Neuguagenas! It's also something of a classic of its kind, and beats "San Francisco", "Nob Hill", "Little Russell" and "Diamond Jim" hollow in its lusty evocation of an earlier era. Its brawling, colorful canvas is presented with an incredible eye to detail and pace - it crackles from the word go, and never lets up until it limps into its rather weak and spineless ending. Not that there's any concession to popular taste or censorship; it's just that nobody seems quite sure how to end it, and the fadeout does have rather the look of a joint bright idea dreamed up at a script conference. But until that point it's a fine piece of work, all the more remarkable in that in stands up under the weight of repetition and cliché throughout the years since. Despite our familiarity with the Beery-Cooper brand of semi-theatrical melodrama (prior to this think of the stylized treatment it to it in "Treasure Island" and "The Shaughnessy's Boy") and the later and harder-to-take Beery-Margaret O'Brien gags, many of their dramatic scenes still work extremely well. Beery may be 100% type oast too, but he's a good enough actor to get away with it, with the rich canvas of supporting players - from Herman Bing to Pert Kelton - is a joy to behold. And considering the limits of her dramatic range, it's rather surprising how well Fay Wray survives too. There's no disputing that she was, and is, a lovely lady - but one can't help suspecting that her better directors (notably Stone of course) chose her more for the way that they could manipulate her, than for faith in her dramatic prowess. Perhaps what saves her is her mannerisms - the hesitancy, the trembling approach to every line as though she's only just read it and doesn't think she can get away with it, the eternal virgin who seems to blush with shame from even knowing about fates worse than death - aren't so much deliberately applied mannerisms as natural characteristics. Even later, playing sophisticates with modish clothes and perfect Max Factor makeup, she retained a naivete which was often her greatest charm and her acting gimmicks, along with any external "Kong Kong", "The Bowery" offers "The Shaughnessy's" Wray characterization and performance. It also offers one of Raoul Walsh's best and (apart from a lack of cheerful sadism) most typical directorial chores; oddly enough, it was to be his last major film (both directorially, and in terms of budget) until he joined Warners in the early 40's. The remaining seven years of the 30's marked the low-point in Walsh's career - disappointing "A's, interesting "B's, some work in England - for reasons never sufficiently explained.

- W.K. Everson