March 18 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"PAYMENT DEFERRED" (MGM, 1932) Directed by Lothar Mendes

Scenario by Ernest Vajda and Claudine West from the play by Jeffrey Doll, based on the original novel by C.S. Forester; Camera: Merritt Gerstad; A film with Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Sullivan, Dorothy Petersen, Vera Teasdale, Ray Milland, Halliwell Hobbes, William Stack, Ethel Griffies, C. Montagu Shaw, Crawford Kent, Carl Stockdale.

Charles Laughton, whose movie work up until 1931 had been negligible, scored an enormous success as the star of "Payment Deferred" on the London stage (with wife Elsa Lanchester playing his daughter, the Maureen O'Sullivan role in the film) and duplicated that success in New York, when the play was brought to Broadway. He was immediately swapped with Hollywood offers, but returned to London before finally accepting a Paramount deal, with "The Devil and the Deep" as his first American film. "Payment Deferred" was actually one of the last of six major Hollywood films (for Paramount, MGM and Universal) that he made in 1932. Reviews were again good, especially for his performance, but the film was not a major success. It was considered too realistic and horrific, and in England (this was before the British censors had instituted the "B" or Horror-Adults Only category) was often reclassified for adults only by local censor boards, so that its distribution was slight. For 1932, it was a grim film, especially since it could be directly related to depression conditions and wasn't an escapist horror film; today of course, in the light of so many psychological studies of murderers and conscience (including Laughton's own "The Suspect") it doesn't have quite the same starkness and power, and one wonders too what made MGM give the assignment of a specialist to this film. Nonetheless, the film is tightly constructed, and Laughton's performance in a difficult role is still outstanding. Since the story starts without explaining how such a man got into such (for him) rather unlikely financial difficulties, it's difficult to accept them as anything but a theatrical set-up. Secondly the character (quite apart from his murderous characteristics) is presented as mean, petty, insincere and a bore--the kind of person we all know unfortunately. So when sympathy comes for him, it comes rather late--and it's quite a tribute to Laughton that he does manage to win us over so completely. Laughton is certainly the whole show, though Teasdale and Petersen are exceptionally good, and Ray Milland's one big sequence--or act--has genuine tension, despite Milland's over-concern with dictation. (The two played well together much later in "The Big Clock" of course, also with Maureen O'Sullivan). Neil Hamilton, usually listed for the film in most reference sources, has not a frame of footage--possibly he may have played O'Sullivan's society boy-friend, only to have the sequence dropped. Author Forester gets no screen credit at all, curiously. The film has never been remade, possibly because its ground has since been so well dug by other writers, but a lot of people seem to feel that it was remade; a couple of questions usually reveals that they are thinking of Betty Davis' "Payment on Demand".

**INTERMISSION**

"BILLY THE KID" (MGM, 1930) Directed by King Vidor

10 reels


This is a high-quality action-adventure for the over slogans Closing Process.

The only one of the short cycle of big-scale early-talkie westerns to be available for screening today (though fortunately, in one form or another, "In Old Arizona", "The Big Trail" and "Cimarron" do still exist), "Billy the Kid" is a most unusual western for MGM to have made. For one thing, it's a fairly small-scale production, and in some ways quite a crude one. (Crude that is, when one things in terms of MGM polish). Much of it stands out clearly by silent-type standards, some of it has been measurably from a musical score. Nevertheless, this almost deliberate lack of slickness--plus the dust, the use of actual locations from the Lincoln County war--the dust and the flair for realism--bulls a very obvious point, and aren't just shrugged off with a wino and much stamina--or lack, together with Eddie Cahn's "Law and Order", the only sound western to duplicate the austerity and starkness of the old Hart-Inscoe westerns. It's easily the best Billy the Kid ever, and a thousand times better than the Robert Taylor remake's worst worst super-western ever. As a remake, it is not, as one might expect, a pale copy of the original work by Burns. Hart worked on the film with Vidor, tutoring Brown, loaning Billy's own guns, and doubtless offering much advice. The expertise shows, though Hart must have been dismayed by the absurd happy ending--tacked on solely for the US, since Europe saw the more sensible one, ending in Billy's death. It's odd to see Brown and Richard's, those protagonists of so many later Supreme & Republic "B" westerns, here pitted against each other in a major western by a major director--although Beery, restrained quite surprisingly, steals the whole show.