Monday next, July 28th: Early Henry Hathaway: "To the Last Man" (1933) with Randolph Scott, Esther Ralston, Noah Beery, Gail Patrick, Shirley Temple; and "Come On Marines" (1934) with Richard Arlen, Idna Lupino, Ann Sheridan.

July 21 1962
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
A William K. Howard program

"WHITE GOLD" (DeMille-Pathes, 1927) Produced and directed by Wm. K. Howard
Presented by C. Gardner Sullivan; Camera: Lucien Andriot; adapted by Garrett Fort and Tay Garnett from the play by J. Palmer Parsons; continuity: Marion Orth; edited by Jack Dennis; titles by John Farrow and John W. Krafft; 6 reels
With: Jetta Goudal, Kenneth Thompson, George Bancroft, George Nicholls, Cydle Cook

When Cecil B. DeMille left Paramount in 1926 to form his own independent company, he took with him a number of stars (Leatrice Joy, Rod la Rocque) — and director Howard. After turning out those varied and interesting Rod la Rocque vehicles, Howard produced and directed tonight's film — "White Gold" — the film that established his reputation as a major director, and took him away from slick actioners and westerns. As with Joe May and "Homecoming" a couple of weeks back, it is surprising to find a director of his melodramatic leanings turning out so accomplished a non-action "mood" film. However, despite his great versatility in tackling everything from musicals to romances, melodrama was to remain Howard's real forte, albeit the glossy, stylish melodrama backed by big budgets and James Wong Howe's camera work, rather than the gutsy little actioner. Having recently seen his "River Pirates," "Sherlock Holmes" and "The Power and the Glory" it's good to report that these films from his best (and "lost") period hold up extremely well.

"White Gold" was a tremendous critical success in 1927, and prompted one trade critic to write: "From the standpoint of production, scenario construction, directing and acting, 'White Gold' compares most favorably with the best German films that have been brought to America. The production style is of the same order as 'The Last Laugh'. The deeper psychology is revealed in this film than in any other ever produced in America".

Allegedly, "White Gold" was, like "Greed", a boxoffice bomb. But it's rather difficult to see how it could have been; with critical acclaim, very popular stars and a production cost that must have been minimal, it could hardly have failed to recoup its costs and shown at least a nominal profit. After all, even "Greed", despite legend to the contrary, did show a profit.

Inevitably, "White Gold" has lost some of its lustre through the years; the similar but more polished and often more cinematic "The Wind" has tended to steal most of its thunder — and in any case, until a couple of years ago, "White Gold" was thought to be lost and was not available for reappraisal. Certainly "The Wind" is a better picture — but "White Gold" came first, and who knows how much it may have influenced the Seastrom film? Intriguingly enough, the American Film Institute is now waxing enthusiastic over a further discovery — "The Canadian" (late 1926), directed by William Beaudine from a Somerset Maugham story, which is similar to both and reportedly superior to both. Since it can immediately precede "White Gold", Howard may well have learned a lot from it.

In any case, "White Gold" does hold up rather well today, especially in view of its deliberate pace, and a theatrical flavor which aims more at mood than realism, and limits itself to two or three cramped sets which intentionally heighten the claustrophobic nature of the tale. At first there seems a little too much conventional cinematic intervention from Cydle Cook and one suspects that this is a film with an unjustly inflated reputation — but as the film proceeds its power grows, and its climax is a real bombshell. To discuss it in detail would be to rob it of its essential element of surprise, but in at least one respect — which will be readily apparent — Howard anticipates one of Hitchcock's tricks in "Psycho".

Despite being essentially a static and talk-bound theme, Howard manages to keep it nicely visual. His rhythmic editing of a rocking-chair movement that Cruze saw it — and remembered it when he did the Ray Robinson sequence in "If I Had a Million". Even though his opportunities declined in later years, Howard always retained his visual flair — there are moments in his 1942 "Klondike Fury" that instantly recall "White Gold". It was Howard's dream to remake "White Gold" as a talkie, but his own revised script for it was little more than the original script with dialogue sketched in, so perhaps it is just as well that he was never able to promote it. At one time, the remake rights were held by the Laughton-Pomeroy-Mayflower group ("St. Martin's Lane", "The Beachcomber") and it is rather a pity that it was never done under their auspices.

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"BACK DOOR TO HEAVEN" (Paramount, 1939) Produced, directed and written (original story) by William K. Howard; Associate Producer, Johnnie Walker; screenplay by John Bright, Robert Tasker; Camera, Hal Mohr, Bill Kelly; Art Directors, Gordon Wilson, William Saultner; editors, Jack Murray and Hans Pomer; Musical direction, Erno Rapee; 8 reels With Wallace Ford, Alene McMahon, Stuart Erwin, Patricia Ellis, Bert Frohman, Kent Smith, Van Heflin, George Lewis, Bruce Evans, Doug McQuillen, Helen Christian, Robert Vivian, Hugh Cameron, Iris Adrian, Georgeette Harvey, Jimmy Lydon, Anita Macee, William Harrigan, Jane Seymour, Robert Wilhadeck, Billy Sedfield, Kenneth LeRoy, Raymond Hoe, Al Webster, Joe Barry, David Landau, Wilfrid Lucas, Spec O'Donnell, Don Haggerty, Johnnie Walker, William K. Howard.

In a sense, "Back Door to Heaven" was Howard's talkie equivalent of "White Gold" - a basically non-commercial, deeply-felt film, one of his very few really "personal" films. Coming after a three-picture sojourn in England, he no doubt also hoped it would re-establish him as a major Hollywood name. It didn't: between this film and his death in 1954, only six pictures remained to him - five very good and slick "B's", and one "A" - Cagney's "Johnny Come Lately". Howard's last film was "A Guy Could Change" in 1946.

There is sincerity and power in "Back Door to Heaven", and these qualities still show through - while Wallace Ford's performance remains one of his best. But other elements work against it, both artistically and commercially. For one thing, together with Fritz Lang's "You Only Live Once", it is about the most consistently down-beat, depressing, and dramatically loaded of all the "social melodramas of the 30's. And as a 1939 release, it was behind the times, way out of step with what Hollywood was doing and audiences wanted. Secondly, filmed in the East, it faced many of the handicaps of New York-based production, not least in the lack of conviction in the studio-created "exteriors". The budget obviously was not large, and Howard had to economise on the very things he did best - stylishly staged action sequences. On the other hand, an Eastern production enabled him to take advantage of many (then) unfamiliar New York stage actors, Kent Smith among them. Van Heflin (who had certainly made several films prior to this) was also roped into service; he was doing "The Philadelphia Story" on stage that year, and had apparently all but abandoned his thus-far negligible movie career.

Whatever the film's shortcomings, they are not due to any interference with Howard during production; he seems to have had complete freedom to bring in his favorite bit players from the coast, and to use whatever production associates he chose. Camera man Hal Mohr was - and is - one of the best in the business, and art director Gordon Wilson had worked on "Sunrise", and won an Academy Award for Howard's "Praetorian". Erno Rapee's score, making effective - if ultimately excessive - use of "Home Town" is very much in the tradition of scoring for late silents; the mood it creates is often just right, even if its musical subtlety is negligible. Howard's long-time friend and his first star, Johnnie Walker, is on hand as an associate producer - and also does a good acting bit as the tough trustee in the prison sequence. Howard himself has an effective acting bit as the prosecuting attorney. (And isn't that Barton MacLane's voice, dubbed-in, during a prison scene?)

Despite the slickness of his last Hollywood films ("Mary Burns, Fugitive", "The Princess Comes Across"), and the gloss and style of his best British film ("Fire Over England"), "Back Door to Heaven" seemed to stamp Howard as an old-fashioned director, and prevented his return to the Hollywood big-time. It was reissued in the late 40's, double-billed with another off-beat Paramount social oddity, "One Third of a Nation". Sold to an independent outfit, both films were retitled, and exploited via some of the most tasteless, sex-and-violence-ridden ads of all time - and received relatively little distribution.

Howard, like W.S. Van Dyke, was a craftsman of the highest order, but essentially a "commercial" craftsman - and no disrespect to him for that. It's sad and ironic that he should fall down (in a boxoffice sense) only with those films that he really believed in, and that were not mere assignments to him. In any case, we're glad to be able to "show" Howard films on one bill this evening.

William K. Everson