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Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Early Talkies: Stage to Screen

"THE LOCKED DOOR" (United Artists-Joseph Schenck, 1929)
Directed by George Fitzmaurice; screenplay by G. Gardner Sullivan from the play "The Sign on the Door" by Channing Pollock; Assistant Dramatic Director, Earl Browne; Settings by William Cameron Menzies; Photographed by Ray June; Assistant Director, Colleen Tate; editor, Hal C. Kern; 7 reels
With BARBARA STANWYCK, ROD LA ROQUE, BETTY BRONSON, WILLIAM BOYD, Zasu Pitts, George Bunny, Harry Stubbs, Harry Restyayer, Mack Swain, Parnell Pratt.

It is now over eleven years since we last saw "The Locked Door". In the interim, films like "Applause" and "Sunny Side Up" have reminded us that not all very early talkies were stagebound and unconscious; but just as many films on the other end of the scale - "The Racketeer". "Son of the Gods" - have reconfirmed that when early talkies were content to do just that, they could be pretty grim "The Locked Door", which had been made earlier as a silent, especially since it faces the additional hazard of being based on a stage play. Little attempt is really made to hide these stage origins; the curtain falls, climaxes are evenly spaced and easy to spot, even though a slow fade substitutes, and all the entrances and exits are handled in a distinctly theatrical fashion. Yet Fitzmaurice ("Son of the Sheik", "Night of Love", "Kata Hari") gives it a lot of his old style. There is no talk just for the sake of talk, the camera keeps on the move to offset the limitations of locale, many sequences are played silent, and dialogue exchanges are at least broken down via cutting. After a lively opening (including a brief senor cut for a later reissue) the film does rather settle down to a placid development that is familiar (in the late 20's and early 30's) mixture of mime and melodrama that was such a specialty of Clara Bow and Swanson at the time. A musical score would have helped to strengthen some of the plotting moments, although its absence sometimes helps. The climax is really quite moving, and there its austerity is a decided plus factor. Music might have made this a more emotional ending, but in its present, unpollished form, it does have a certain raw punch to it. Barbara Stanwyck suffers with her usual competence, and Betty Bronson is as charming as ever, though less effective when forced to speak. Here was truly a case of any voice being the wrong voice for such an enchanting visual player, and it's a little bit of a shock when one realizes that the film comes only four years after Peter Pan - the theme of Rod la Rocque, flashing his gleaming teeth and emulating every word, gives possibly the worst performance of his career. Incidentally, the valet - George Bunny - was John Bunny's brother. A final footnote: the basic location (Boyd's house) is actually George Fitzmaurice's own house, on San Angelo Drive in Beverly Hills. It has hardly changed a bit, and its spacious interiors leave the cameras plenty of room to move around. Yet the art direction - flowers everywhere for example - is such that it couldn't look more like a typical phoney over-dressed Hollywood set of the period.

"THE CHURCH MOUSE" (Warner Brothers-British, 1935) Directed by Monty Banks; 7 reels
Screenplay by Scott Darling from the play by Ladislaus Fodor and Paul Frank; With Laura La Plante, Ian Hunter, Edward Chapman, Jane Carol, Clifford Heatherly, John Batte, Monty Banks, Gibb McLoughlin, Florence Wood.

"The Church Mouse", which provided a reliable summer-stock showcase for both Colleen Moore and Harry Pickford, here makes an excellent vehicle for lovely Laura La Plante. At the time her Hollywood career was apparently finished, as was her marriage to William Seiter; a starring vehicle like this was a big morale booster for her personally, but alas did nothing to restore her career. An excellent actress with a fine voice, a sparkling personality and good looks that lasted right through her occasional roles in the 40's and 50's, she was shamefully wasted by the talkies. Warners was one of the few Hollywood companies that really took pains with the British films that they were required, by law, to make - it was a normal thing. It's solidly and handsomely made, its sentimental whimsy reinforced by a sprightly score, some pleasing London locations, and by some surprisingly wicked and risque dialogue which has almost a Lubitsch pungency to it; hardly a rare quality in the mid-30's, but certainly uncommon in this kind of "quiet" English movie. It's a little-known film, and we think you'll find it a really delightful surprise.

--- William K. Everson ---