August 18 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Comedies

"HANDS ACROSS THE TABLE" (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Mitchell Leisen
Produced by E. Lloyd Sheldon; screenplay by Norman Krasna, Vincent Lawrence and Herbert Fields from a story by Vina Delmar; music and lyrics by Sam Coslow and Frederick Hollander; Camera: Ted Tetzlaff; 8 reels

It's not easy to forgive past sins when approaching a Mitchell Leisen-directed film; one can't forget how he ruined "Death Takes a Holiday", and how "Easy Living" and "Midnight" drew everything from their cast and scripts, and apparently nothing from his direction. All one usually remembers from his films is the chi-chi art direction and the predominance of white marble pillars. But while one is tempted to give most of the credit for this film to Norman Krasna - perhaps justifiably, since it so much resembles later wacky Krasna films like "The Big Hangover" - at the same time, it gives so much over-all satisfaction in its light-weight comedic charm that one certainly can't, and shouldn't, shut Mr. Leisen out. This time he really seems to have pulled it off, and it is a consistently enjoyable and frothy comedy. The title is a delightfully and literally appropriate one, and the whole film is a typical Cinderella romance of the depression years, yet obviously not taking itself too seriously, and content to be a light-hearted cinematic escape from non-cinematic problems. The rich are all fairly pleasant, their lack of concern for money conveyed by such many lines as "It'll be terrific for my camel trip to the pyramids!" Poor Ralph Bellamy - the eternal other-man in romantic comedies of the 30's - is once more cast true to type, but even that is a curious kind of plus now, tipping us off right away what the outcome is going to be, so that we can immediately forget the plot and just sit back to enjoy the engaging and often witty tomfoolery and the pleasant performers. It's a distant cousin to "Holiday", but by no means a poor relation.

"THE GREAT PROFILE" (20th Century Fox, 1940) Directed by Walter Lang
Produced: Darryl F. Zanuck; Associate, Raymond Griffith; Sreenplay by Milton Sperling and Hilary Lyon; Camera: Ernest Palmer; 8 reels

Dedicated Barrymore followers tend to resent "The Great Profile" for its tactless exploitation of Barrymore's own contemporary troubles and state of mind - but it is so much fun, and such good if unusable Barrymore farce, that it's hard to bear the film any ill-will. (The later "Playmates" is something else again!) In any case, if nothing else, "The Great Profile" is an invaluable (if unofficial) record of what went on, day by day, during Barrymore's run of "My Dear Children" - when every performance was different, and audiences came not to see the play, but what John did to it - in terms of ad-lib dialogue, jovial drunken slapstick and sundry mayhem. "The Great Profile" was actually intended as a quicker AgaPhe Menju vehicle; he was tastefully paid off, and the script revamped to match Barrymore's much publicised stage antics. Alas, it does tend to run out of steam a bit towards the end, it has so much gusto, ribaldry, slick one-liners and uninhibited Barrymore antics - to say nothing of Fox's ultra solid production values and a strong cast in support - that one can't help but regard it as a not unworthy part of the overall Barrymore chronicle. Whether by accident or intent, John played the same character that he did in "Broadway Through a Keyhole". It's unsubter than it deserves to be, and cries out for Preston Sturges' sure blending of satire and slapstick, but on its own boisterous level it's still a most enjoyable frolic.

-- William K. Everson --