Sept. 6 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE BLACK ROOM" (Columbia, 1935) Directed by Roy William Neill
Produced by Robert North; original story by Arthur Strassm; screenplay by
Strass and Henry Meyers; Camera, Al Siegel; 7 reels
With Boris Karloff, Marian Marsh, Robert Allen, Thurston Hall, Katherine deMille,
John Buckler, Frederick Vogeding, Torben Meyer, John Eisief, Henry Kolker, Egon
Brecher, Lois Lindsey, Herbert Evans, Colin Tapley, Edward van Sloan, John George
Robert Middlmas, Michael Mark, Sidney Bracey.

With a plot-line much in the Wilkie Collins and "The Woman in White" tradition,
"The Black Room" is a curious one-shot horror film for Columbia. Superficially
at least, it is almost as stylish a production as the James Whale for Universal,
and Columbia never again did anything quite like it. Certainly their series of
horror films with Karloff in the 40's, though interesting, didn't approach the
quality of this much earlier film. With its traditionally Victorian story of
prophecy, curses, sealed rooms and the like, and an effectively Gothic pictorial
vocabulary in the castle, cemetery and church scenes, it is the kind of melodrama
that just isn't made at all any more. Many of the exteriors, with their painted
brooding skies and distorted trees are deliberately non-realistic, as were the
woods and rocky hills in Universal's first three Frankenstein films. Backed by a
cast of good solid reliables, Karloff turns in an excellent performance and the
editing in his dual-role scenes is particularly neat. The musical themes
throughout are first-rate, interestingly speeded-up in the climactic reel and
thus transformed from macabre "mysterious" themes into all-out "agitato" music.
In this speeded-up form, the themes were later used as standard fast-action
music in "The Secret of Treasure Island" and other serials and westerns.

"THE OLD DARK HOUSE" (Universal, 1932) Directed by James Whale
Produced by Carl Laemmle jr., Screenplay by Benn W. Levy, with additional
dialogue by R.C. Sheriff, from the novel "Benighted" by J.B. Priestley;
Camera: Arthur Edeson; 7 reels
The Cast: Morgan (Boris Karloff); Pembriel (Mervyn Douglas); Sir William
Porterhouse (Charles Laughton); Oliphant (Lillian Bond); Horace Femm (Ernest
Tresiger); Beatrice Femm (Eva Moore); Philip Waverton (Raymond Massey);
Margaret Waverton (Gloria Stuart); Sir Boderick Femm (John Dudgeon); Saul
(Bremar Wills).

"The Old Dark House", last seen theatrically in the very early 1950's, after
which it was withdrawn to ultimately make way for William Castle's practically
blasphemous remake, is a film that almost invariably disappoints on the first
viewing. (It certainly so affected me when I first saw it in the early 1940's,
on the occasion of its first revival in England). On the basis of its title,
it seems to have made no effort at all to live up to its reputation, it seems at first to be lacking in substance; but
fortunately, it's the kind of film that one wants to see again, and from the
second viewing on, it gains tremendously. One has time then to forget about its
lack of spectacular thrill set-pieces, and just sit back and admire its mood,
its style and its wit. (Incidentally, British disappointment was possibly
heightened by the fact that the set of eight stills issued with the film for
theatre display contained two gruesome but ambiguous stills from different
horror films, thus giving the inaccurate impression that the film had been cut
into the bargain!)

It has been a long time since I read Priestley's original novel, but I remember
finding it tough going, and feeling that he was more at home with either his
straight social "problem" works -- or with his simple regional comedies of
manners like "When We Are Married". Elements of both schools seemed to be
rather forced into "Benighted" and got in the way of the melodrama too often;
the one major difference between novel and film versions was that Priestley
killed off his hero, Pembriel, whereas the film -- and the indications are
that this might have been a last-minute decision too -- lets him live.

Whether this was a deliberate ploy of the book or not I don't recall (possibly
it may have been, since Pembriel's death would cancel out Saul's), but the
film's scenario is carefully balanced, pitting the five inhabitants of the
house against the five guests. In a very rough kind of way, each has an
opposing counterpart -- and the night of terror brings out the best (or worst)
abilities in them solving all their problems just as damn automatically behoves
the inscrutable Feme laager of a nightmare. (Although admitted, it is a
little difficult to consider oneself free of problems with Karloff still
lumbering around!)

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
"The Old Dark House" is more than just a delightful example of its genre, it is also a kind of prototype in reverse - a belated blueprint and summing-up of all that had gone before in "The Bat", "The Cat and the Canary" and so many others, distilling the best from those earlier works, and adding so much that was uniquely James Whale's. Despite its many colorful ingredients, it works best when it eschews the grim exterior set and the fearsome Karloff figure. There's really no plot, merely a basic situation, and the highlights bear little relation to what plot it does have. There's a marvellous sequence in Eva Moore's cluttered, claustrophobic Victorian room in which she talks about the sin and debauchery of an earlier day - and makes the baleful influence of the past seem far more menacing than the bogeyman of the present. In fact, there's a lovely likeness in sentiment to the Universal Lon Chaney films where the scared Gloria Stuart tries to cheer herself up by making shadows on the wall - only to be inexplicably interrupted by the unexplained shadow of Eva Moore. And James Whale's always sardonic sense of humor is very cunningly employed. A "shock" closeup of the principal menace in his initial introduction was always an unwritten law in this kind of film, and Whale dutifully supplies it. But then he immediately follows up with a comedy line of dialogue which quite squashes the Karloffian menace, and suggests that a tongue-in-cheek approach is under way.

To an extent it is, and the audience is nicely lulled into a sense of false security, heightened by a deliberate anti-climax near the end, only to be outsmarted when Whale plays his final act completely straight.

Unlike "Dracula" and so many early horror films, "The Old Dark House" does not suffer from a lack of music. There is no music, but the constant sounds of wind, rain, lightning, flapping shutters and billowing curtains forms its own kind of symphony. Moreover, the film is so tightly paced that there are none of those awkward pauses where one becomes aware of the absence of music.

Photographically it is superb, and represents some of the late Arthur Edeson's finest work. The first glimpse of the Old Dark House, through the mud and lightning flashes, is one of the most effective "establishing shots" ever created, and as good as or better than anything of a like nature in the great German fantasies of the 20's. The sets are splendid, yet they still need a man of Whale's taste to get the most out of them; Universal later repeated the same sets to Mascot and other companies for cheap thrillers, and they were soon unrecognisable since so little was done to exploit them in terms of camera placement and lighting. A few shots are beautifully constructed miniatures, and Whale wisely never gives us a good look at the exterior of the house in the daylight - so that even though the individual human menaces are explained away, the house itself as a kind of baleful embodiment of evil can remain undiluted in our memories.

Notwithstanding the pictorial delights of the film, or the Karloffian diversions, perhaps the greatest joy of the film lies in the teamwork of Eva Moore and James Whale. Time and time again, in their beautifully written (and delivered) dialogue. It's probably Thayer's best role, and I'm not forgetting his admittedly more colorful Dr. Preatorius in "The Bride of Frankenstein".

There's just the right mixture of fear, pride, potential insanity and merchant humor in everything he does, while Eva Moore is perfection itself as the kind of ageing hangover from Victorian days that was a surprisingly prolific national type in England in the 30's. I still remember the feelings of mixed awe and mild fear that I had when I was (frequently) taken to visit such an old lady, who apparently never emerged from a parlour that retained gaslight fixtures, kept the thick velvet curtains permanently closed against the sunlight, and was filled to overflowing with stuffed birds in cages and glass trays of preserved butterflies. To further embellish the image, her daughter had been forced into a life as a Captain in the Salvation Army - and for all I know, they're there still, with a horrid secret hidden in the West Wing, awaiting the rising waters of a James Whale storm to sweep them away.

Most of you presumably will be seeing the long-lost "The Mystery of the Wax Museum" this week, and disappointing though it is today, you'll undoubtedly enjoy it to the full. But a chance to see it and "The Old Dark House" side by side can only confirm not only what a superior work "The Old Dark House" is, but that it is also one of the real masterpieces of its genre.

A postscript regarding Eva Moore, familiar character actress in minor roles in all the Hollywood films of the 30's and 40's. Her presence in "The Old Dark House" was almost an accident, since she had come to Hollywood the year before, not really seeking work, but accompanying her daughter Jill Esmond, then married to Laurence Olivier, and looking (quite successfully) for Hollywood work.

William K. Everson