Monday next, February 1st: "THE PENALTY" (1920, dir: Wallace Worsley), one of the best Lon Chaney vehicles; preceded by "THE PICTURES THAT MOVED", a fascinating coverage of the Australian cinema of 1900-1920, with excerpts from early films, interviews with directors, etc.

January 25 1971 The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Mysteries from 1929

"THE STUDIO MURDER MYSTERY" (Paramount, 1929) Produced and directed by Frank Tuttle; Associate Producer, Victor Voyda; Scenario by Ethel Doherty and Frank Tuttle from a story by the Edingtons; Camera, Victor Milner; 6 reels With Neil Hamilton, Warner Oland, Fredric March, Doris Hill, Chester Conklin, Florence Eldridge, Guy Oliver, Eugene Pallette, Donald MacKenzie, Gardner James, Lane Chandler, Mischa Auer.

One has a right to expect relatively little from either Frank Tuttle or a 1929 talkie mystery, where the very nature of the genre lends itself to prolonged talk, and the still-novel situation of movies with sound made a stale treatment perfectly acceptable at that time. Even as a mystery, the film is not terribly engrossing - the murderer is patently obvious even before we have been made aware of the crime, the alibi is transparent, and we can only help matters by noting that the "obvious" suspect does turn out to be the killer - thus saving our mystery aficionados to wonder whether "obvious" we actually mean the least or most suspicious? Fortunately, its success as a movie or as a mystery is quite brief, so its static treatment never has time to pall - as it did, for example, as "The Canary Murder Case". Moreover, it is set against a film studio background, so that it is visually more interesting than the standard office and apartment sets which were usually brought into prolonged play in such movies; and too, it has a number of old reliablee (Oland, Conklin, Hamilton) and some new ones (March, Eldridge) playing for all their worth, so that its individual ingredients add up to a deal more diversification than one might expect.

"BULLDOG DRUMMOND" (Sam Goldwyn-United Artists, 1929) Directed by F.Richard Jones, Assistant by Lesley Pearce; Screenplay by Sidney Howard from the play by H.G. "Sapper" McNeille; Camera, George Barnes and Gregg Toland; Sets by William Cameron Menzies; 10 reels With: Ronald Colman, Joan Bennett, Lillian Tashman, Montague Love, Lawrence Grant, Claude Allister, Wilson Benge, Charles Sellon, Adolphe Miller, Tetsu Komai, Gertrude Short, Donald Novis.

It must be admitted that "Bulldog Drummond" isn't quite the masterpiece that it seemed on the occasion of its first re-unveiling in the Museum's Goldwyn cycle a dozen years or so ago. The sequel, "Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back", obviously patterned after it, is in many ways superior and is certainly a slicker wending of comedy and melodrama even though the then more rigid Production Code cut down on much of the sheer fun of the villainy. Nevertheless, "Bulldog Drummond" is still quite a picture, and in direct contrast with the far more standard 1929 levels exemplified by "The Studio Murder Mystery" it's easy to see why it was such a huge success. It was considered by far the best talkie of 1929 - unanimously, and by critics who had seen "Applause" and "Mannequins" too - and whilst today it obviously is less important than those two films, at the same time it's smooth combining of slick dialogue, beautifully produced Code out on much of the sheer fun of the villainy. Nevertheless, "Bulldog Drummond" is still quite a picture, and in direct contrast with the far more standard 1929 levels exemplified by "The Studio Murder Mystery", it's easy to see why it was such a huge success. It was considered by far the best talkie of 1929 - unanimously, and by critics who had seen "Applause" and "Mannequins" too - and whilst today it obviously is less important than those two films, at the same time it's smooth combining of slick dialogue, beautifully produced visual style (sets, lighting) co-created by Barnes, Toland Menzies, must have made it seem a really modern and polished production in its day. Its tongue in cheek approach is still delightful, and the jovially lecherous villainy of Lawrence Grant still one of the best things that actor has done. If we may mix our metaphors, the tongue in cheek does get a little heavy-handed at times, aware of its cleverness in kidding a genre that hadn't yet been developed, but it was really in order. But these are minor quibbles in a film which is still a first-rate entertainment, and enjoyable! A brisk one. (The 10 reel length is misleading; in actual footage, it really equals about 8 reels. Nothing is missing, but in the early sound period, films tended to be broken down into more, but shorter, reels). It's a matter of unofficial but reliable record that Harry D'Arrast actually directed a major portion of the film, which probably accounts for his being handed "Ruffles" as well. The film does have the same flavor as F. Richard Jones' silent Fairbanks film "The Gaucho", but he was well here had problems with dialogue. It's hard to believe that Lesley Pearce, a routine director of ordinary two-reel comedies, had very much to do with the film's success. It was also the last film that Jones directed.

William K. Everson

GOOD NEWS: Just to hand - a lovely film that fills in a major gap in our knowledge of the silent British cinema - Cecil Hepworth's 1920 HELEN OF FOUR GATES, with Alma Taylor. To be shown in our next quarter.