

Next program: Dec. 17th: "The Rat" (1937) with Anton Walbrook, Ruth Chatterton; preceded by "The Mysteries of Paris" (1934; French, English titles).

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

December 3 1973

Both of tonight's films are frankly rather pedestrian early talkies by William K. Howard. As far as I'm aware, these 16mm reversal prints represent the only preservation work yet undertaken, and even if they are eventually preserved properly, via 35mm negative and print, it is unlikely that they will be shown very frequently. We make no apology for their generally minor entertainment value, and offer them purely academically as an example of a fine director making a difficult transition to sound. While most of the early talkies were the work of the journeyman directors who wanted to establish themselves quickly in the new medium - and in some cases, as for example David Butler, proved themselves quite surprisingly resourceful - many of the better directors were more hesitant, reluctant to turn their backs on silents, pessimistic about the possibilities of sound. Howard, a fine visual silent director, is one of those who seems to have used his routine early talkie assignments merely as a means of finding out what problems the sound film would present. Despite reviews which hailed his direction on these two films as "splendid" and "excellent", there is no sign of his having used them as anything but valuable experience. There is very little cinema in them - but he used them to get his feet wet in the new medium, and by 1937 had mastered it, ready to go again with films like "Sherlock Holmes" and "Surrender" which restored his fine pictorial and editorial sense and welded it neatly to dialogue narrative.

A further common denominator of both of tonight's films is that each was remade by Fox as a rather enterprising "B" in the early 40's.

THE VALIANT (Fox, 1929) Directed by William K. Howard; Scenario by John Hunter Booth and Tom Barry from a one-act play by Holsworth Hall and Robert Middlemass
Camera, Lucien Andriot, Glen MacWilliams; Asst. Director, Gordon Cooper. 5 rls.
With Paul Muni, John Mack Brown, Marguerite Churchill, Edith Yorke, Richard Carlyle, DeWitt Jennings, Clifford Dempsey, Henry Kolker, Don Terry, George Pearce

Apart from an expanded opening, this is a virtual transposing of a one-act play to the screen. It is short, but still sufficiently long that one expects either a more dramatically positive resolution, or at least a cinematically more exciting one. It is an all-talkie in the strictest sense of the word, and that, and the fact that it represents Muni's screen debut, are its basic facets of interest. Muni's performance is understandably theatrical, with comparative subtleties introduced only into his closing moments; it's difficult to recognise a major new screen star in the making here, and of course it would be two or three years before he hit his filmic stride. Fox's "B" remake of the 40's, "The Man Who Wouldn't Talk" (with Lloyd Nolan and a good role for Mae Marsh) was an intelligent expansion of the theme, adding melodrama, motivation and a happy ending without really destroying the limited integrity of the original.

SCOTLAND YARD (Fox, 1930) Directed by William K. Howard; produced by Ralph Block;
Screenplay by Garrett Fort; Camera, George Schneiderman; 7 reels
With Edmund Lowe, Joan Bennett, Donald Crisp, Georges Renevant, Lumsden Hare, David Torrence, Barbara Leonard, Halliwell Hobbes, J. Carrol Naish, Arnold Lucy.

While "The Valiant" was made early in 1929, "Scotland Yard" was produced well into 1930, and the approximate 18 month gap between the two shows. Some of Howard's pictorial flair has returned, and his happy knack of getting a film off to an exciting visual start, but it is still ponderously paced. The plot, probably partially suggested by an earlier 1929 Fox film "Such Men Are Dangerous", doesn't give him too many opportunities however, and the title is somewhat of a misnomer since while Scotland Yard is casually involved, it hardly dominates the proceedings. Edmund Lowe, with whom Howard worked well on a number of occasions, is somewhat stilted, but Joan Bennett is lovely and has a pleasing grace. The 1941 remake was somewhat livelier, though it discarded the dual role for the star. (Henry Wilcoxon played the crook before, and John Loder after). Nancy Kelly was the heroine, Edmund Gwenn the inspector, and a post-Dunkirk story of spies kept it on the move rather more than Donald Crisp's machinations here.

Footnote: it is worth mentioning in passing that Fox also produced a French version of "The Valiant" in 1930.

William K. Everson