December 17, 1973

THE MYSTERIES OF PARIS (France-Eclair, 1934) Written and directed by Felix Gandera, based on the story by Eugene Sue; Camera, Bourges and Issard; Music: Georges Auric; Assistant Director, Marcel Cohen; Art Direction, Marie Bottrell; Sets, Louis Dye and Barbaque; English subtitles. 9 reels.

With Henri Rollan, Madeline Ozeray, Lucien Baroux, Constant Bamy, Raoul Marco, Lucienne le Karoband, Roger Karl, Karthe Musinne, Marcelle Geniat, Raymond Curdy, Rollia Normam, Francois Rodon, Nadia Sibiskala, Georges Vitrey.

Both of today's films have a certain amount in common in that both are melodramatic, tales of the seedy Paris underground, both were done as silent and as sound films, and both are based on relatively celebrated works from another medium. "The Mysteries of Paris" appeared first as a long running French newspaper serial, and one feels that the silent version must have been a good deal better. This sound remake is a rather strange combination of Feuillade and early Max Ophuls; slow, stately, often elegant, its story a mixture of old world romanticism and serial thrills. It moves too slowly for it to be wholly effective as pure melodrama, but the sets, the colorful characters and above all the terrible fates and revenge that are so often threatened (and sometimes carried out) keep it full of surprises if not constant excitement. It is frustratingly subtitled by an American distributor obviously hoping to keep his production outlay to a minimum. Elementary expressions which require but brief titles are translated faithfully, while plot motivations and inserts of letters and documents are often totally ignored. Without a knowledge of French, you may find yourselves floundering occasionally - but as with Feuillade's "The Vampires," not always knowing why doesn't prevent one from enjoying the how. It's an obscure film, as rare in Europe as it is here (after our showing, the print is going over to the Cinematheque in Brussels) and just why this print should have materialized from Atlantic City is as much of a mystery as its own plot line.

-- intermission --

THE RAT (Eko Radio-British, 1937) Produced by Herbert Wilcox; directed by Jack Raymond; Screenplay by Marjorie Gaffney from a play by Ivor Novello and Constance Collier; Camera, Freddie Young; edited by Peggy Hemmesay, 7 reels.


"The Rat" was perhaps better suited to the silent film, and as directed by Graham Cutts and starring author Ivor Novello with Mae Marsh, had a Griffith-like quality that was perhaps underlined through those two stars having made "The White Rose" for Griffith. (Its success was responsible for an imaginatively titled sequel, "The Return of the Rat"). The original "The Rat" does still exist, and holds up well; we plan to show it some time during 1974. However, despite being old-fashioned, and with a British sedateness that does not sit too convincingly with French abandon, this remake is a surprisingly good production. The sets are extremely handsome, Freddie Young's camerawork expert and imaginative, the cast strong, and the development fairly brisk. (Indications are of a minor trim at the end; it seems to finish without grace, but the plot is all wrapped-up, and all that seems to be (possibly) missing is a more stylish fadeout. Jack Raymond, who directed, was a veteran Hepworth actor from the earliest silent period who became a directorial specialist in comedies and thrillers. Most of his films were very entertaining, none of them outstanding, and none of them remotely as ambitious as his last film, "Little Big Shot," was finished and released shortly before his death (in 1953) at the age of 67. A financial if not historical footnote: the film was Herbert Wilcox's last under his old regime, its production company being dissolved and a new one formed to sponsor much more elaborate films - "Victoria the Great" and "Sixty Glorious Years" among them. The old company was liquidated just days before Ruth Chatterton was to get paid for "The Rat" -- and she never did get paid!

-- William K. Everson --