March 31 1978
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

WINGS IN THE DARK (Paramount, 1934; released 1935) Directed by James Flood
Produced by Arthur Hornblow Jr. Screenplay by Jack Kirkland and Frank Partoe from a story by Nell Shipman and Philip D. Hurst; Camera, William C. Mellor and Dewey Wrigley; 7 reels
With Myrna Loy, Cary Grant, Robert Cavanagh, Esocoe Barnes, Dean Jagger, Bert Hanlon, James Curtis, Russell Hopton, Graham McNamee.

"Wings in the Dark" is a surprisingly unambitious programmer in which to spotlight Myrna Loy and Cary Grant, who were by 1934 names to conjure with if not yet of starring stature. On the other hand, aviation films had been a common appeal in the early and mid-30's, and its serial material - plus its soap-opera ingredients - probably made it an ideal vehicle to get maximum exposure and thus consolidate Grant's popularity. Paramount could hardly have been concerned about building Myrna Loy, who had five solid MGM hits behind her in '34, plus Capra's "Broadway Bill," but her presence certainly helped in the Grant build-up. In fact, coming from films like "Men in White," "Manhattan Melodrama" and "The Thin Man," Miss Loy would have had every right to feel somewhat irked at the criticalness of her material here, but, real professional that she is, she doesn't show it - and her performance (somewhat of a day run for "To Hot to Handle") is a good deal better and more serious than the role really warrants.

Technical advances in aviation have made such enormous strides since the 30's that all aeronautical films from that period now seem a little quaint - the much-acclaimed "Test Pilot" most of all - and the rather unlikely invention that Grant is working on is so dated that it almost gives the film a period charm in itself. But it's an extremely handsomely photographed film, spends a good deal of its time in the air, and has a lot of capable character actors making the most of their novelistic enjoyment of the of dramatic nonsense. It moves and it has a plot, elements that we used to take for granted, but which become positive assets when placed side by side with the pacing and structure (or lack of them) of many of today's movies.

A PASSPORT TO HELL (Fox, 1932) Directed by Frank Lloyd; scenario by Bradley King from an original story by Harry Harvey; Camera, John Seitz; 7 reels

Harry Harvey's story "Bomt Offering" was dashed off between "Shanghai Express" and "The Devil and the Deep," and is clearly from his exotic "Femmes Fatale" period. In fact, its relationship to the Dietrich von Sternberg school is underlined deliberately. However, graceful, charming and even somnous though Elissa Landi is, she is somehow too much of an English lady for one to buy her bill of goods here. Her scarlet past and her pastorate present are set with the kind of problems that a little sensible conversation could dispose of quite easily, whereas Dietrich merely had to surmise languidly "It took a lot of men to change my name to -- Shanghai Lily" and one believes everything that the plot hints at, and more. However, given - and accepting - that one major weakness, "A Passport to Hell" is an enjoyably steamy romp. It's beautifully photographed and lit by John Seitz, who manages to transform Catalina very convincingly into Africa. The casting, too, is full of wonderful old reliables: Warner Oland of course, the unmatchable take on Alexander Kirkland, and Paul Lukas as the explorer who hasn't seen a white woman in months - the kind of role that Henry Fonda kidded so beautifully in "The Lady Eve." It's a solidly mounted production, and quite possibly Frank Lloyd's best talkie to date (though admittedly films like "The Longh" and "Son of the Gods" didn't provide too much competition). Lloyd is one director whose fairly minor position in film history has been confirmed rather than elevated by rediscoveries of recent years. With the possible exception of the 1919 "The World and its Women," a very strong film, most of the other unexplored at all have had the good fortune of "A Tale of Two Worlds." His reputation still seems to rest almost solely on "Cavalcade," "Barkeley Square" and "Mutiny on the Bounty" - films that owe a great deal more to script and performances than they do to acting. But "A Passport to Hell" has a good deal more life and style than most Lloyd films, and it's good to have this one 16mm print - thus far the only preservation material to be made - on hand for the record.

A program you might care to make a note of: New School, June 11; "Face in the Sky" with Spencer Tracy, Marion Nixon; "Paddy the Next Best Thing" with Janet Gaynor and Warner Baxter, both directed in 1933 by Harry Cohnmann.