Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

March 24, 1974

Two early Bogarts, both directed by Irving Cummings

A DEVIL WITH WOMEN (Fox, 1930) Directed by Irving Cummings; scenario by Dudley Nichols and Henry M. Johnson from "Dust and Sun" by Clement Ripley; Camera, Arthur L. Todd; 6 reels

A HOLY TERROR (Fox, 1931) Directed by Irving Cummings; Associate Producer, Edmund Grainger; Scenario by Ralph Block, Alfred A. Cohn and Myron Fagman from "Traillín" by Max Brand; Camera, George Schnaiderman; 5 reels

Tonight's is frankly a somewhat below-par - or at least light-weight - program by the Huff's normal and never too exciting standards. Obviously the main point of interest is in seeing two early, consecutive, otherwise unavailable Bogarts, and that is a shame justifies both films even though individually they are of no great importance - nor since Cummings was never a director of much inspiration, or remarkable entertainment values. What they do, more than anything else, is to make one wonder why on earth it took so long for Bogart to achieve even nominal stardom, let alone major stardom. For here, virtually a decade before that stardom arrives, one can see Bogart if not at full fruition, at least with most of his style well-established. He plays the romantic lead in the first film, and (more effectively) the villain in the second, and plays them well. That he was an unorthodox "type" should have mattered less then than later, since with the coming of sound, Hollywood was taking chances on many non-standardised leading men, who all had the advantages of good voices and stage experience - viz., James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni and others. Indeed, in view of the generally unpromising quality of Muni's early film work, it is all the more surprising that he was rapidly elevated to prestige and stardom, while Bogart continued to be shunted back and forth from studio to studio and from one routine role to another.

"A Devil with Women" may well have been made with more than one eye to its value (in a Spanish version) for the Latin-American market, and for that market it probably paid off well. It's the kind of rough, brawling adventure that needs real flair - and preferably a director like Raoul Walsh at the helm - for it to pay off. It has neither flair nor much vitality, though it's a fairly elaborate film for a programmer. It's also similar in some ways to "Laughing at Life", an incredibly cheap "special" that McLaglen made for Mascot a couple of years later.

"A Holy Terror" (the combination of "Devil" and "Holy" in the two titles suggests a 42nd Street kind of exploitation-showmanship which neither film delivers!) is much better by any standards, but seems especially so in comparison with "A Devil With Women"! It's a surprisingly minor film in which to find George O'Brien, until a year previous still a major star for John Ford. It's a remake of the silent Tom Mix "Traillín" which we ran a couple of years back and while it follows the basic plot quite well, it simplifies it, reduces its action, mystery and really quite dress and inserts light-film dramatics and comedy instead. While O'Brien still had many good, rugged, Fox westerns ahead of him, this one film does seem to anticipate the formula adopted for the later series that O'Brien did for Sol Lesser and Fox release, with a stress on good stories, light comedy, and a playing down of action. The minimised action here is a little disappointing, especially in the climax when the villain totally escapes his consequences. But it's a most enjoyable trifle, with George's stylish cheerfulness, Daily Eilers' stylish vivacity, and Bogart's equally stylish manner, much more interesting and keeping the film absorbing just on the strength of three such strong yet contrasting personalities.

W.K. Everason

Note: the corrected print of Dupont's "Atlantic" (which we had to cancel before because of a lab mis-printing) is now in, is in very good shape, and will be scheduled as the first program on the new listing going out this day.

Just in from the API: a silent European film, THE FORSAKEN JEW (3 reels). They know nothing about it yet, I haven't screened it, and apparently it was censored just before it decomposed. We're throwing it on cold tonight, hoping (a) that it may be interesting, and (b) that some of us may pick up some clues as to source, year, country of production, etc.