Next program: Feb 10th: A program courtesy of the A.F.I.: two early Universals by and with Cleo Madison, A HOUSE DIVIDED and THE DEFIANCE; and THE BLOT (1921), written, produced and directed by Lois Weber, with Claire Windsor & Louis Calhern.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

January 27 1975

PRESTIGE (RKO Radio, 1931; rel. 1932) Directed by Tay Garnett; produced by Harry Joe Brown; Screenplay by Frank Edwurd Paragon, Tay Garnett, Rollo Lloyd, from "Lips of Steel" by Harry Hervey; Camera, Lucien Andriot; 7 reels
Art Direction, Carroll Clark; a Charles R. Rogers production; 7 reels

We're showing tonight's two films in reverse chronological order not only because the earlier of the two is far the better, but also because this sequence transforms the combination into an Edna Ferber-like Odyssey for Ann Harding, one film being virtually an unofficial sequel to the other if one can accept Dudley Digges as a transformed Melvyn Douglas. The title, "Prestige," seems like an attempt to make Harry Hervey's original story and title sound less like his usual melodramatic reticute ("Passport to Hell", "Shanghai Express") are more like a typical genteel Harding vehicle. The title is explained away rather pointedly at an early juncture — the prestige is that of being white! It's a less exciting film than most of Tay Garnett's from this period, but it has the liability of being unable to equal its stunning opening scene: a technical tour-de-force which in a long continuing moving camera shot, starts out with back projection, seques into an elaborate miniature, and with only one discernible cut, dissolves into a full-scale set which reaches via an unexpected use of the zoom lens.

CONDEMNED (Samuel Goldwyn-United Artists, 1929) Directed by Wesley Ruggles; Dialogue Director, Dudley Digges; Screenplay, Sidney Howard from the (1928) novel by Elmer Rice; Camera, George Barnes; Gregg Toland; Set Design, William Cameron Menzies; editor, Stuart Heisler; 10 reels (also released in a silent version, and a shorter sound version).


While Goldwyn never produced quite the number of enduring classics that he was prone to believe he had, at the same time he made a major contribution to the very early sound film which was overlooked then (excepting perhaps "Bulldog Drummond" and "Arrowsmith") and is often overlooked today. As a group, his films did succeed in welding the great visual style of the silents to the oral needs of the sound film. They were superbly designed and photographed, and the scripts were far more literate than most. This of course didn't mean that they were all good films, but they did all have a modern and glossy look to them. "Condemned" is a bit slow (not least because that kind of story has been done so many times since) and nobody would claim it was a major film, but it is a very modern looking film, quite able to stand direct comparison with films of two or three years later. (And two or three years of course, represents a tremendous amount of progress and development in that period). It's the visuals that hold most of the attention, though Colman's performance is as polished and assured as always; it's always easy to take him for granted, but a performance as smooth as this shouldn't be taken for granted in 1929. The script seems to have softened the downbeat original story somewhat, in deference to Colman's romantic image, and the final scene is a happy plagiarism from the final scene of "The Big Parade". Dudley Digges makes the very best of his villainous lechery; how much obscenity and leering indulgence he can cram into a single simple line to his wife: "Are you ready for bed?" — and how much refined distaste Ann Harding is able to display in her underplayed reaction?

NOTICES: As I'll be in Texas on that date, the March 10th program will be put back a week for March 17. There'll be an official mailing confirming it, but please pass the word along. Also, MGM are suddenly unable to come up with a print of LOVE ON THE RUN for the New School on Feb 14th, though they promise it for the Summer. The substitute will have the same stars and director: FORSAKING ALL OTHERS, W.S. Van Dyke, with Gable and Crawford.

-- -- -- Wm. K. Everson -- --