

Next program: Oct. 16th: Sam Grey's ROBBERS' ROOST (1932, dir: Louis King) with George O'Brien, Maureen O'Sullivan, Reginald Owen, and a Dudley Nicholls screenplay; KING OF THE GAMBLERS (Paramount, 1937) with Claire Trevor, Akim Tamiroff, Lloyd Nolan, Buster Crabbe, Evelyn Brent, Porter Hall, Dorothy Burgess; one of the best of Robert Florey's stylish crime thrillers for Paramount.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

September 22 1975

SHERLOCK HOLMES (Goldwyn Pictures, 1922) Directed by Albert Parker; produced by F.J. Godsol; Scenario by Marion Fairfax and Earle Browne from the play by William Gillette and the stories by Arthur Conan Doyle; Camera, Roy Hunt; Original length, 8 reels; this print, 7 reels.
With John Barrymore (Sherlock Holmes) Gustav von Seyffertitz (Moriarty); Roland Young (Dr. Watson) Carol Dempster (Alice Faulkner); William Powell (Foxman Wells) Hedda Hopper (Madge Larrabee); Reginald Denny (Prince Alexis); David Torrence (Count von Stalberg); Anders Randolph (James Larrabee); Louis Wolheim (Craigin); Percy Knight (Sid Jones); Peggy Bayfield (Rose Faulkner); Margaret Kemp (Therese Robert Schable (Alf Bassiok); Robert Fischer (Otto); Irmaden Hare (Dr. Leighton); Jerry Devine (Billy); John Willard (Inspector Gregson); and Holmes Herbert.

Far more astounding than the film itself are the conditions under which it was preserved. A few years ago all that existed of this film were rolls and rolls of negative sections, in which every take - not every sequence, but every take - were jumbled out of order, with only a few flash-titles for guidance, and the complications of Roland Young with a mustache in some scenes, without in others and a script that in many ways differed from the play, adding to the herculean task of putting it all together. Since the melange of footage contained no apparent highlights, it also seemed that the best part of the film might be missing - conditions not conducive to enthusiastic reconstruction. However, with the limited help of director Albert Parker, who remembered but little of the film and who died while the reconstruction work was in progress, Kevin Brownlow in England did piece it together, replaced titles and generally made sense out of an impossible jigsaw. The result is one of the most painstaking recovery jobs ever, and quite overshadows the fact that the film itself hardly seems worth such devotion except on a purely academic level. It must be one of the blandest misuses of potentially exciting material ever, and also one of the "talkiest" silents. It literally has no highlights, so the initial impression on seeing the jigsaw a few years back was not inappropriate. The London backgrounds add a little flavor, but surprisingly sparse use is made of them; some of the lighting is striking, pre-dating Fritz Langian compositions, yet it is inconsistent and the film really has no pictorial style of its own. Even the plodding but effective theatricality of the original play is minimized by reshaping; a very long (three-reel) prologue slows down an already leisurely film, as well as being unfaithful to Doyle; and the play itself is reshaped, with the one big confrontation between Holmes and Moriarty expanded to two, the first one quite superfluous, and the relationship of Moriarty to the Larrabees also changed. Once past that foreword, it is relatively faithful to the Gillette play and thus has the distinction (apart from Gillette's own earlier version for Essanay) of being actually based on that play, unlike the two talkie Fox films which claimed to be, but certainly weren't. Albert Parker did his best work with Douglas Fairbanks, who more than once seemed to transit his own energy to Parker. Barrymore can't pull off the same trick; at the time readying himself for his stage "Hamlet", he clearly lends his profile to Holmes, and not much more, entering into the spirit of it far less than he had done with "Raffles" in 1917. There's a magnificent cast (including one of Parker's favorite villains, Anders Randolph) but nobody gets much of a chance to shine. Obviously, some footage is still missing, and this can explain some of the rough edges here and there - but the addition of an extra reel and a half, which is about the sum total of the missing scenes, could only slow the pace even more, since the story does make perfect sense, and obviously no important sequences or motivations are missing. It's good to have it back to complete - or fill in - the gaps in our Barrymore and Holmes chronologies, but it must be admitted, that if it is a major find, it is also a major disappointment. But Kevin Brownlow can take all the bows that on this occasion Barrymore and Parker (though perhaps not Gustav!) will have to forego.

Dept. of extreme trivia: for those interested, we have on hand tonight, from Albert Parker's collection, a prop from the film - Moriarty's file on Foxman Wells (played by William Powell).

--- intermission ---

TEN CENTS A DANCE (Columbia; 1931) Directed by Lionel Barrymore; produced by Harry Cohn; Screenplay by Jo Swerling and Dorothy Howell, suggested by the Rodgers & Hart song; Camera, Ernest Haller, Gilbert Warrington; 8 reels
With Barbara Stanwyck, Ricardo Cortez, Monroe Owsley, Sally Blane, Blanche Frederici, Martha Sleeper, David Newell, Vic Potal, Sidney Bracey.

Space is too brief now to discuss this long-lost soap opera, the first of Stanwyck's four 1931 releases. Ella Smith's admirable Stanwyck biography gives full details of the film's production, but somewhat downplays its entertainment values. It's predictable, the cliches (today if not then) often unintentionally funny, and Monroe Owsley's rotter a bit too caddish, even by his degenerate standards. But it's a slick, enjoyable film, held together by Stanwyck's performance, and direction by Lionel Barrymore not at all as disinterested as one has been led to expect.