The Théodores Huff Memorial Film Society

April 5, 1982

SAFETY IN NUMBERS (Paramount, 1930) Directed by Victor Schertzinger; Scenario, Marion Dix.
Original story, George Marion Jr., Camera, Henry Germain; Dance Director, David Bennett; 76 mins.

So many of the early Paramount musicals are so talkie and so stagebound that their interest today is academic at best. "Safety in Numbers" can't avoid the accusation of being stagebound, and in a sense it is even primitive, but there are many compensating factors. While it has a typically artificial plot, at least it acknowledges that that plot is merely a springboard for the song and dance numbers - and there are at least seven of them, all flavorful, some rather catchy - so that one never has to wait around while long stretches of plot and dialogue pave the way for the next song. A line or two of dialogue is all that is necessary to launch a song, and some of them, such as "I'd Like to be a Bee in Your Bonnet (so I could be in your bonnet all day)" and "My Future Just Passed" are quite delightful. The pre-Code dialogue and situations are often risque and amusing, and the young ladies are alluring. Their careers all took off in directly opposed areas - Carole Lombard and Virginia Bruce obviously did rather well for themselves, while Geneva Mitchell wound up at Columbia in 2-reel comedies and playing in Ken Maynard "no westerns.

-- Intermission --

JEUNES FILLES EN DETRESSE (YOUNG GIRLS IN TROUBLE) (Globe Films, France, 1939) Directed by G.W. Pabst; Screenplay by Christian Viniaux, adaptation and dialogue by Jean Bernard-Jacq.
Tristan Bernard, from a novel by Peter Grima; Camera, Michel Molinaro; Art Director, Andre Andreyev; Music, Ralph Erwin; French dialogue, unedited (synopsis provided); filmed under the title "The Sacred Law;" Venice Festival prize-winner, 1939; 90 mins.
With: Michelle Presle (Jacqueline Fresle); Marcelle Chantal (her mother); Jacqueline Delubac (Pola d'Ivy); Louis Carletti (Marcot); Pauline Elwart (Desiree); Marguerite Moreau (Madame Villand); Andre Inquet (Maitre Fresle); and Margo Lion, Milly Mathis, Robert Pizani, Arthur Devere, Gaston Jacquot, Pierre Tay, Victorie Carletti, Georges Vitrey, Michel Francois.

The last of Pabst's pre-war French films, never released in this country, nor in England (so no reference material on it in English has ever appeared) has long been an unknown quantity. Based on the title, and Pabst's reputation, one has always assumed it to be a rather sombre film in the tradition of "Madeleine in Uniform." To the contrary, it turns out to be a rather gay and charming film much in the manner of such Dassin films as "Three Smart Girls," in which the children try to do something about parental divorce problems. It does have slightly more serious undertones than the American equivalents, and once, in a suicide-attempt sequence, we seem to be in for some more traditional Pabst. But on the whole, it's about the most light-hearted Pabst we can recall (not forgetting "Don Quixote") and even art-director Andreyev ("Raskolnikov"; "The Queen of Spades") seems to be in a happy frame of mind, and the girls' school with its art-deco swimming pool seems more Hollywoodian than Gallic.

It is hardly a major Pabst, but it is an interesting example of Pabst in an unfamiliar vein. Even on light-hearted material though, he - as usual - doesn't make it easy for the audience. Opportunities for obvious laughs or pathos are deliberately downplayed, and a great deal of the narrative is conveyed by dialogue. If you don't speak French, then a purview of the synopsis first is absolutely essential; the gaiety and charm often come through, but the motivations sometimes don't! Biggest surprise of all perhaps is the astonishing self-assurance of Michelle Presle, then just a teen-ager, in a very demanding role - and virtually her first of any size. There had been a couple of bit parts before this, but not more. It must have been very frustrating for her at the time to find herself on the verge of major stardom - only to have the war prevent distribution of the film in the U.S. and Britain, and to possibly abort French production altogether. As it happened, the latter was not the case, and she did achieve considerable success and popularity in films made during the occupation by Gance, L'Herbier and others.

--- William K. Everson ---
The divorce case of Trevor and Pearl is resolved with the daughter, Jennifer, being sent to Mrs. Villand's private school, Jacqueline Foster, the divorce lawyer, whose husband, Jacob, is deceased.

Jacqueline after the case to say he'll be late. It is her 18th birthday, and she is getting ready for her party. Her brother, however, a doctor, is busy—finding time only to criticize the way Jacqueline has altered a pretty frill into a worn group's gown. Neither mother nor father have time to spend at their daughter's party, and decide, in view of the demands on their careers, that Jacqueline too should be sent to Mrs. Villand's school.

When Jacqueline arrives she meets her boyfriend, Poles. Poles never knew her father, and this makes Poles, as an insatiable lover, prove his daughter out of sight for fear of damaging her career. Initially the other girls give Jacqueline cold shoulders. But they know she father secured the divorces that broke up their families, and Jacqueline stands up for herself and the girls quickly come to like and respect her.

Waiting day—happiness and sadness. One girl meets her parents' new spouses. Another has visits from two sets of parents. Tretta's new father is closer to her age than her mother's. Mothers go out on new husbands as they play cards. Mr. Prease goes alone to visit Jacqueline, as his wife is busy with a patient. The girl's naturally shy him. Poles, however, introduces him to Poles, her actress-aunt, just before he leaves. Jacqueline sets him many questions about divorces.

Jennifer is visited by her father; both are clearly unhappy at the separation, but the law has stipulated that she cannot stay with him.

That night the girls discuss their plight and decide to do something about it.

Poles goes to Prease's office to discuss legal matters; while there, she notes a phone call from his wife again saying work keeps her at the hospital; Poles invites her to see her show.

That evening Jennifer leaves; one of the teachers, her is especially sympathetic, because she is also the child of divorced parents.

While Jacqueline is looking in the girls, her father goes to see Poles—and they met that afternoon for the first time. In the gym next day, the girls decide that since parents have lawyers to speak for them, they must have an organization too, and form The League Against the Divorce of Parents, which is abbreviated to Didoips. Margot is unhappy however, her mother has ignored her. Jacqueline immediately phones Poles, who makes scenes by visiting immediately. She gives her daughter a watch, and gives Jacqueline a present too—a ring.

At the hospital, Mrs. Prease talks with a doctor who tells of his son unhappy childhood, and she determines to visit her daughter. Jacqueline speaks of Poles's many kindnesses and of her friendship, and her is clearly upset at this "intrusion" and especially at Jacqueline's accepting a gift from him. Prease proceeds to return the ring, and in order to get Poles and her mother together, gives the ring to her to return.

Poles is ushered into Poles's room to await her arrival. As she waits, her husband comes in—clearly very much at home. Their confrontation is joy and final. Mrs. Prease leaves the ring, and goes.

During typing class, the girls of the rules of Didoips instead of the set lesson, and the specter of schoolteacher reads a cheap novel. That evening, they rehearse the anthem they have composed. And next day, they discuss how to proceed: via newspapers? The radio? Jacqueline decides that legal channels are best. She goes to the Minister of Justice, but is turned away. Looking for her father, she finds that he is out, and going home, she finds her father's assistant. She talks generally about divorce, but he assures her she is referring to her parents' planned divorce, and expresses pity. Only then does she begin to understand what is happening. She finds her mother weeping, and her mother's maid tells her everything—except the name of the other man. Leaving, disconsolate, she forgets the portfolio of Didoips rules—while her father's assistant finds.

Back at school, Jacqueline tells the girls that they have a "test" case, and alone with Margot, reveals that the woman in the case is Poles. (Up until this point, Margot, who has been known to the girls only by her real name, not her stage name). Margot is grief-stricken. Mr. Prease is already finding his affair with Poles most satisfactory; as with his wife, her career comes first. That night, the girls go on a date to see Poles at the theatre— but Margot stays behind and goes herself. At the theatre, the girls are astonished to find that Poles is the woman they have known only as Margot's mother. Jacqueline takes matters into her own hands; dropping the pretense of being school-paper reporters, she talks with Poles alone and explains the whole situation. Poles admits that her father is attractive but is only a passing affair, and says that Jacqueline should be content with it, and forgive him. A wardrobe woman enters, and Poles tells her that Margot is at the hospital. having attempted suicide.

At the hospital, Mrs. Prease is in charge of the case. Poles, much concerned, insists on staying with her daughter. Jacqueline, now understanding the importance of her mother's work, finds her resentments dwindling.

At the school, Mrs. Villand serves a letter from the Minister of Justice, and is outraged at the idea of a secret society in her respectable school. The girls explain their reasons. The letter has been read to them, and they write to the Minister. He is surprised to find them young people, rather than any adults. They make a factory about other laws, but basically agree with them. He tells them that they are the future, and they proceed to divorce. The Minister then introduces the lawyer he has assigned to represent their organization; it is Jacqueline's father. He takes her home; the Prease family is united once more, each one with a greater understanding of the other. At the hospital, Margot recovers and her mother race that they will never be separated again. During, now happily back at the school as a teacher herself, phones the Poles at home, and says that she is now out of trouble too, thanks to Mr. Prease. The whole family listens over the phone as the assembled girls sing the "Didoips" march to them.