"FIVE STAR FINAL" (First National, 1931) Directed by Mervyn Le Roy
Screenplay by Byron Morgan from a play by Louis Weitzenkorn;
Camera: Sol Polito

With Edward G. Robinson, H.B. Warner, Marian Marsh, Anthony Bushell, Boris Karloff,
Aline McMahon, George E. Stone, Ona Munson, Frances Starr, Polly Walters, David
Torrence, Parnell Pratt, Oscar Apfel, Robert Ellis, Frank Darren.

Of all the gangster, courtroom, newspaper and "social" melodramas of the early
30's that together form a loose kind of genre all their own, "Five Star Final" is
far and away still one of the best - and least dated. Subject to a re-
viewing, I suspect that Lewis Milestone's version of Hoot-Hoot-Chu's "The
Front Page" is still the best of all the newspaper melodramas, but certainly
this superb LeRoy film - which drew its inspiration from "The Front Page",
and followed it into release by about six months - isn't far behind. LeRoy was
really at his peak then ("I Am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang" is from the same
period) and he, Wellman and Hawks were turning out some of the most biting,
and most durable, of all the socially-conscious melodramas.

Despite a preponderance of dialogue, one hardly ever thinks of "Five Star Final"
as having come from the stage. The giveaways are minor: the office boy, used for
transitional scenes and to "plant" necessary information; some of the faintly
stabby "curtain" dialogue, as in the scene where H.B. Warner realizes that he
has been betrayed by the pseudo-minister. But these moments are few; for the
rest the pacing is quite dynamic, and what must have been a difficult and
possibly tedious scene on stage (the mother trying desperately to get the
managing editor on the phone) becomes simultaneously poignant and exciting
thanks to skilful utilisation of a split-screen.

There is the usual racy approach to sex and religion typical of movies (and
especially Warner movies!) in that free-wheeling era, and some of the wisecracks
must give tv editors ulcers these days, but despite this limited if breezy
comic element, one never feels inclined to take "Five Star Final" as lightly as
most of the other newspaper dramas of those years. With romance subordinated,
and lacking a real hero, it's the grimmer and most uncompromising of the
bunch, sharing the relentless tragedy of those other two LeRoy films, "I Am A
Fugitive From a Chain Gang" and "They Won't Forget".

The dialogue is top-drawer all the way, and the performances match it. Apfel,
Ellis and Pratt are perfect as the money-grubbing editors, H.B. Warner superb
as one of their victims, Karloff tremendously effective (if admittedly rather
theatrical) as a former divinity student ousted from that profession for
sexual degeneracy; Marian Marsh as always is pretty, but hopelessly inadequate
and outclassed by all the talent around her, and she just can't rise to the
demands of her big climactic scene. (Why did Warners insist on pitting her
against Robinson, William Powell and John Barrymore?) But basically it's
Robinson's film all the way and a subtle and spectacular improvement on his
rather superficial "Little Caesar" performance for LeRoy the year before. It's
a superbly controlled performance, underplayed for the most part, but steadily
building until it explodes in one of those rising crescendo curtain speeches
that used to be so much a part of movies and theatre, and which have now all
but disappeared, largely for the want of actors like Robinson, Pat O'Brien and
Lee Tracy to put them over. "Five Star Final" is one of Robinson's - and one of
LeRoy's - best films.

Prior to "FIVE STAR FINAL", we will be showing a highlight excerpt from
"THE MOUTHPIECE" (Warners, 1932, directed by James Flood and Elliott Nugent
from the play by Frank Collins). The courtroom melodramas and the newspaper
melodramas were closely and cynically related, especially those from the
Warner stables. "The Mouthpiece" is one of several movies of the period dealing
with the great Fallon (John Barrymore and Lee Tracy played the role too) and
this is a typical sequence presenting Warren William in a brawny courtroom
defence, followed by an underworld party notable for the presence of a young,
blonde and unbilled Paulette Goddard as a gang moll. "The Mouthpiece" was
remade in the 40's as "The Man Who Talked Too Much" with George Brent, and in
the 50's as "Illegal" with Edward G. Robinson. "Five Star Final" was also
remade, but only as a 1936 6-reel "B" programmer ("Two Against the World") with
Humphrey Bogart in the old Robinson role.

-------- William K. Everson -------