"Bluebeard's Eighth Wife" (Paramount, 1937; released 1938) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch; Screenplay by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett from the play by Alfred Savoir; Camera: Leo Tover; Music: Werner Heymann With GARY COOPER, CLAUDETTE COLBERT, David Niven, Edward Everett Horton, Elizabeth Patterson, Warner Eymer, Herman Bing, Franklyn Pangbourne, Lawrence Grant, Tom Ricketts, Barloie Boardman, Charles Halton, Albert Conti.

"Bluebeard's 8th Wife", originally a stage vehicle for Ina Claire in 1921, and two years later screen material for Gloria Swanson under Sam Wood's direction, is a kind of milestone both in screen comedy and in Lubitsch's career. 1938 saw the last of the gay and crazy comedies of the 30's. Tonight's film and "The Rage of Paris" were the tail end of a delightful genre that had flourished between 1932 and 1934, and had been given new impetus in 1936 with "My Man Godfrey" and "Desire", retained its drive in 1937 with "It's Love I'm After" and "Nothing Sacred", and now in 1938 was beginning to lose steam - partially because of the increasingly less frivolous situation in Europe, and not least because of the rapid change that Hollywood had then become, the stifling Production Code and the concern for "wholesome family entertainment" pushing any remotely adult fare off the screen. (Now of course we have come full circle -- and not necessarily for the better with our resent glut of "adult" fare!) Preston Sturges still lay ahead of course, but he was a lone oasis to make up for the diminishing comedy activities of Lubitsch, Wellman, Del Ruth, Hawks and LaCava. 1939 did have another Brackett and Wilder script in "Midnight", but how it needed (and lacked) a Lubitsch. In many ways, "Bluebeard's 8th Wife" is the last of the old Lubitsch comedies. He took his last comedy with real bite (apart from his superfluous "black" comedy "To Be Or Not To Be" in 1942) and the last of the breezy pre-war Paris and Riviera-based sex farces. It was his last film for Paramount, and while it may not have been up to the standard of his elegant 1932 masterpiece "Trouble in Paradise", it was still so far superior to "Design for Living" and "Angel" that it hardly represented a decline. Elegant from first scene to last, bright and fast-paced, beautifully written and played, flawlessly constructed so that Messrs. Bing and Pangbourne have their little highlights like taking on a charmingly spirited score, it may not represent Lubitsch at his innovational peak but it does do comfortably and stylishly going through the paces that suited him best. If it remains resolutely a filmed play, it hardly matters; Lubitsch's deft touches and satiric use of music give it a comic gloss that would be impossible on stage, and Claudette Colbert - who never looked lovelier nor was gowned more luxuriously - works wonders with her material. The would-be seduction scene is a masterpiece of its kind, quite worthy of ranking with Barbara Stanwyck's attempted seduction of Henry Fonda in Sturges' "The Lady Eve". It's the kind of tasteful froth that belonged so much to the pre-war years, and that we've never been able to recapture. If we've tried - and certainly Billy Wilder, a director himself from the 40's on, did try in films like "Love in the Afternoon" - the results have usually been heavy-handed and vulgar.

We've commented before on the deadening effect an exit from Paramount has had on many directors and players, Lubitsch and the Marx Brothers in particular. Even with his Paramount stock company of players, Lubitsch couldn't retain his champagne touch when he went to MGM in 1934 to make "The Merry Widow". Back he came to Paramount, and his style returned. Then, in 1937, he went back to MGM to do Garbo's "M المستقبل". Paramount's naive film the merits of which were the personal and the script (Brackett and Wilder again) and only lastly its now much heavier direction. Certainly it (and a series of somewhat leaden Fox comedies that followed) were a step down from "Bluebeard's 8th Wife", which is still a delightful romp, and dates only in its over-obvious use of back projection. Even this now has some academic interest in that Sacha Guitry may be seen emerging from a hotel in one of these process shots! Paramount's story rights on the film have expired, and no attempt has been made to preserve the - in the case of the original film, reputation, today but is the only one exists in this country, and since the film is thus held off theatrical or tv exhibition, we are glad to be able to revive this thoroughly enjoyable specimen of Lubitsch's best years.

Prior to the feature, we will be showing a condensation of Lewis Milestone's silent "THE GARDEN OF EDEN" (made 1927, released 1928) with Corinne Griffith, Lowell Sherman, Charles Ray and Louise Dresser. Based on a play by Eudolf Berman & Hugo C. Oberfelder. Reputedly its American version by Avery Hopwood, it has characters and plot-line quite similar to the Lubitsch film, and makes an interesting comparison. In the 20's, Milestone, Mal St. Clair, Monte Bell and other directors were beating Lubitsch at his own game, though owing him a tremendous debt for having opened up the market for sophisticated European sex farce when he came to Hollywood from Germany in the early 20's. With the coming of sound however, he really hit his stride, and the many Lubitsch imitations thereafter (Milestone's "Paris in Spring" especially) were very pale imitations indeed and no real competition to the now established master of ultra polished and sophisticated screen comedy. 

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