THE NEW SCHOOL
PLAIN & FANCY: A Decade of Film History
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Arnold Bennett's "Buried Alive" has thus far been filmed three times, a silent version with Lionel Barrymore and a 40's remake ("Holy Matrimony") with Greer Garson and Monty Woolley preceding and following tonight's version, while more recently it was brought to life again as a Broadway musical with Vincent Price. Today, Bennett, Alice Duer Miller and James Barrie are forgotten figures insofar as the movies are concerned; there is nothing of the "blockbuster" about their work, they don't lend themselves to "B" pictures, and television adaptations rarely seem to succeed, "His Double Life" is a charming and relaxed trifle, a thoroughly civilised if minor work that could only possibly have been made well in the economic structure of the film industry of the 30's and early 40's. It offers pleasant people, a good little story, amusing chuckles, and above all, charm. Lillian Gish, in her second talkie role (and her last one for a long time) is thoroughly delightful, if a trifle too gracious to be really convincing as a sensible, middle-bracket Englishwoman, while Roland Young seems unable to put a foot wrong in this kind of thing. Some comedy bits misfire, and the trial scene, with its hints of fantasy and attempts to go Lubitsch isn't quite as clever as it thinks it is. Put the lights are bright, the pacing fast and helped by a lovely musical score, and the English milieu generally quite convincing, the more so since the whole film was shot in Paramount's Lindusia studio without the benefit of any exterior locations. Directorially it is almost a one-man show by Arthur Hopkins, whose first film it was. Miss Gish doesn't recall ever doing any scenes under DeMille's direction, but it is probable that DeMille (Cecil's brother, and a specialist in the silent period in charming sentimental romances of this type) was brought in to keep the mechanics of the film in motion. Hopkins concentrated on the lengthy dialogue scenes, a fairly common collaborative policy in the early days of talkies when so many new directors were being recruited from the stage.

"THE GUARDSMAN" (MGM, 1931) Directed by Sidney Franklin Scenario by Ernest Vajda and Claudine West from the play by Ferenc Molnar; Camera: Norbert Brodine With Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Roland Young, Zasu Pitts, Maude Eburne, Herman Bing, and Ann Dvorak as an extra.

Of the dozen or so Molnar works transferred to the screen in the 20's, 30's and 40's, almost none have really succeeded in capturing the essence and sophistication of his originals. Too often and "The Good Fairy" and the thrice-filmed "The Swan" are good examples, the wit and whimsy has been stifled beneath heavy-handed direction and over-sentimental production. "The Guardsmen," though a tasteful and elegant production, is not a particularly auspicious production, and mildly lessens almost all of the work to its two stars, who of course had scored a rousing success with it on stage in the 20's, and who were signed for the film version by MGM in the wake of their equally great success in Anderson's "Elizabeth the Queen" -- a sequence from which provides a neat opening to the film. Not only is it good Molnar but it is also a unique filmic record of one of America's greatest acting teams -- for their only other movie work together consists of a minor silent and a couple of guest-star appearances as in "Stage Door Canteen." Thoroughly rehearsed, and shot economically in three weeks, "The Guardsmen" is the musical version of a comic smash in the big cities, but generally a commercial failure. Nevertheless its pithy wit stands the test of time extremely well, and it seems far less dated today than the Nelson Eddy musical remake, "The Chocolate Soldier," which blunted many of its piquancies to satisfy the demands of the production code. Only in its total lack of background music does it really show its age; the occasionally lengthy camera movements and pace needed a musical spark -- witness the tremendous benefits accruing to Lubitsch's "Parade in Paradise" from its scoring. But otherwise, "The Guardsmen" is an impressive, old-fashioned, very cinematic, piece of filmed theatre. In a very few exterior scenes director Franklin injects elements of visual humor, but for the most part he is content to let the Lunts carry the show without any editorial or photographic tricks, and such is their presence that it works. Lunt dousing his cigarette in a glass of champagne is both good stage "business" and good filmic punctuation, so well timed that it doesn't need a closeup or a cut to emphasise it. Slow and a bit methodical perhaps. "The Guardsmen," is undoubtedly.