"SNOUFLERING FIRES" (Universal, 1924) Produced and directed by CLARENCE BROWN; Story by Sada Cowan, Howard Higin and Helville Brown; ass't. director, Charles Dorian; Cameris, Jackson Rose; sels. With Pauline Frederick, Laura LaPlante, Malcolm MacGregor, Tully Marshall, Nanda Hawley, George Cooper, Helen Lynch, and, as extras, Bert Rosch, Arthur Lake, George Lewis.

"Whether we win it to hold it; or win it to lose it; or never win it at all, the greatest thing in all the world is ... LOVE!"

From this little piece of prose, a catchline in Universal's original ads, it is apparent that "Smouldering Fires" is what is loosely termed "a woman's picture". It's the first silent one that we've shown, and it's a good one. The Pauline Frederick vehicles of the 20's were the counterparts of the vehicles for Kay Francis (mid-30's) and Bette Davis (late 30's, early 40's), although perhaps they paralleled most exactly the Ruth Chatterton films of the early 30's.

For years, especially during the 40's, there was a tendency to look down on director Clarence Brown as nothing more than a slick purveyor of commercial sentimentality. Possibly there was some justification for that attitude then, when his current films by no means represented what he did best, and when his earlier work was unavailable. Looking back today on his films of the earlier 20's, both those made on his own and those made in collaboration with Maurice Tourneur, one is instantly struck by the style which is not hidden in the camouflage of the later, over-produced MGM films. And having gone that far, one is forced to admit that that same style is very much present in the later films too, overburdened though they often were by star-vehicle responsibilities and sometimes absurd scripts. One of Brown's very finest films, "The Trail of '98", is unfortunately unavailable for general reappraisal due to sundry legal hangups; but a lot of the films of the 30's and 40's that are dismissed so readily at the time - "The Bitter Come" for example - are turning out to be much better and more durable than we thought.

The plot of tonight's films basically familiar and predictable, yet what a wealth of style Brown puts into it. Simplicity is one of its greatest virtues. Aware that triangle dramas have a limited range of plot ramifications, Brown rejects most of the expected mechanics of plotting. There are none of those endless complications and misunderstandings that usually plague this kind of form. If only by the avoidance of cliché, the film offers some genuine surprises and, more important, maintains a certain kind of honesty. For his extremely effective fadeout, Brown uses only a simple three-shot, itself a variation on a similar shot that he had employed earlier at a similar critical moment. The result is that in one single shot Brown wraps up the film neatly (easing the audience's thought processes into action as well) where a lesser director would have taken another two reels of novelettish intrigue to arrive at the same climax. Visually the film is handsome and thoughtful without ever being showy. The camerawork is tasteful and imaginative, the camera moving quite frequently, but always for a purpose. The few interiors (notably some Yosemite locations) are particularly well shot, and the sets elegant and lavish (what a pleasure to see height again in this wide-screen age). The sets are cunningly convincing too; despite a comparative lack of detail, the factory looks like a factory. "Smouldering Fires" came out late in 1924 when too much was going on for it to attract the attention it really deserved; the screen was full of big production films like "The Great Panam" and "Ann't Life Wonderful?", and a plethora of boxoffice hits ("Ramola"), critical successes ("Greed") and plain 1920's vintage bread-and-butter pictures like "Silk Stocking Sale". Nevertheless, trade press reviews were uniformly good, all singling out Brown's direction, while Universal thought so highly of it that it was the spearhead picture of their current 21-feature release schedule. Universal also reprinted in the trade-papers a letter of praise from an exhibition group, and the chance one can never put too much stock in this kind of letter, but too often neither nor spontaneous at the same time this one is worth reprinting in part, since it seems so topical today and so applicable to the present production patterns. Addressed of course to Carl Leemle, it said: "I want to thank you for giving to the industry a picture of modern life without cigarette-smoking women, cocktail-drinking flappers, hip-flasks, rolled hose and other "props" so noticeable in current attractions .... this picture, in addition to being a wonderful drama, is certainly a relief .... from a standpoint of drama and entertainment, one of the most entertaining pictures in
many moons .... Director Brown .... had plenty of opportunity to resort to questionable scenes, but he avoided himself of none of them - he kept the pictures clean and wholesome; in lieu of wild parties and indecent exposure, he gave us scenes to make the most confirmed grouch laugh. I believe it my duty to lend my moral support to the class of film you have produced here. The industry needs more of this kind, less of the other kind, if we are to survive" - S.B. Chambers of the Consolidated Amusement Company, Wichita. For those in the audience who do not go for "clean, wholesome pictures", a promise that "White Woman" and "The Hatchet Men", scheduled for December, will make up for tonight!

"ONE MORE RIVER" (Universal, 1934) Directed by James Whale
Screenplay by R.C. Sheriff from a story by John Galsworthy;
Camera: John Hescall; 9 reels

To many, James Whale is merely the director who made four of the best horror films of the 30's - yet the overall taste of those films made it apparent that his ability as a film-maker must far transcend the horror category. The recent rediscovery of (probably) his best film - "The Kiss Before the Mirror" - and its screening by the American Film Institute at the recent Lincoln Centre Festival - confirms that as a stylist and filmic sophisticate, he was quite the peer of Ernst Lubitsch.

"One More River" was Galsworthy's least novel, and also the last in his famous "Parsythe Saga". It was a kind of story especially prevalent on the screen in the thirties, a natural for the afternoon trade for housewives to see together after shopping and tea. They'd all avidly consume the book, argue over the casting choices, see the film and discuss it some more. By this I don't mean to condemn "One More River" to such a rigid or unimportant status. Its type was familiar, but films of that type were rarely up to the standards of "One More River".

As an Englishman I am nostalgically enthusiastic because I have never seen such a convincing and "right" Hollywood film about England - not even "Night Must Fall" or "Cavalcade". Of course, director, scenarist and 99% of the cast were fully paid-up members of the Empire, obviously working with material that had their utter sympathy. The small details that are wrong (Great Western Railroad trains inexplicably running on Southern Railroad tracks!) stand out only because everything else, and the totality of the milieu, is so right. It is a pleasing, gentle, civilised reflection of an England in a period of social change; probably it is as idealised a portrait as was "Done With the Wind"s of a changing South, but its emotional appeal isn't lessened because of that. Quite apart from the sheer delight of seeing some dear old codger like Henry Stephenson amble in every time a door opens, or watching the superb功课 of Diana Wynyard as she downplays an (off-screen) rape by fortifying herself with a cup of tea, it is all so tasteful, well-written, beautifully acted (and spoken), that one deplores all the more the harsh shock tactics and ugliness of so many contemporary movies. "One More River" is sophisticated, witty and "adult" in the truest sense of that word, yet it never offends or makes one squirm with embarrassment as so many contemporary movies do. Undoubtedly a cinema of nothing but "One More Rivers" would be hard to take; but currently we have nothing like it at all, and a cinema of increasingly exclusive "Coming Apart"-type material, is getting decidedly harder to take.

Most of the virtues we have stressed thus far have been those of writing and performing. But Whale's contribution as director is one of the most telling of all; a basically dialogue-developed story is kept superbly on the move (far more so than in the not dissimilar "The Winslow Boy") and the unobtrusive mobility of the camera in the courtroom sequence helps make it one of the finest and most dramatic trial episodes ever filmed. (How nice it is to see a trial in which people actually testify, and listen to what is said, instead of rattling of brevura lines -- as, for example, in the upcoming John Berrymore vehicle "State's Attorney")! Grace is the keynote of this film - from the cool beauty of Diana Wynyard on through the elegant sets and camerawork and smooth editing (how beautifully cut is the simple scene of the train's arrival at the country station - a grace that has all but vanished from film today. -- M.K. Everson --