THE NEW SCHOOL  
FILM SERIES NINE: Program 3  
October 16 1970

SKINNER'S DRESS SUIT (Universal, 1925; released, 1926)  
Directed by William A. Seiter; script by Rex Taylor from the story by Henry Irving Dodge, Lawrence Marston & Edward Paulton;  
photographed by Arthur Todd; 7 reels  
With:  
Pieno accompaniment arranged and played by Stuart Oderman.

When "Skinner's Dress Suit" was released, early in 1926 at the height of Reginald Denny's considerable popularity, the reviews were exceptionally favorable. All of them commented on the film's "clever" and wholesome appeal, and on its complete absence of the vulgarity and sex typing prominent in so many other screen comedies. Even a Jewish stereotype - hardly rare on the screen then, and seldom treated with restraint - comes over with a rather endearing quality. The story had been made previously by Essanay in 1917 with Bryant Washburn and Virginia Valli (and was remade too as an early talkie), but neither of the alternate versions can match the smoothness and charm of this one. It's the kind of slight "Saturday Evening Post" tale which has totally disappeared from films today; as a B" production it would cost too much anyway couldn't compete with "B" acting and directorial talent; as an "A" it wouldn't have the guaranteed appeal to justify its budget. One of the few films of recent decades that fitted into this category was that very pleasing and overlooked Republic film of the 50's, "The Lady Wants Mink" - which, by virtue of its production values, including color, must have lost money. Perhaps it is no coincidence that it was also produced and directed by Seiter, whose best films combined maturity, taste and charm. (We have played several in our series here, most notably the delightful "Hot Saturday"). Slim in plot, the film is nevertheless well made, with a nice balance of gentle humor, wit, and pathos. There is less slapstick and melodrama than in most of the Dennys, and more situational fun. It takes as theme the old adage that "clothes make the man," and comments on the problems of social life and household budgets in the 20's. It's a flavorsome period piece, yet fresh and up to date at the same time. Denny and LaPlante work beautifully together, and the film has real production values in its handsome sets and photography. Incidentally, Laura LaPlante was at that time married to Seiter. Although dissolved, Seiter, a man of taste in all things, did almost as well the next time around in marrying Marion Nixon, who remained his wife until his death in 1964.  
------ 10 MINUTE INTERMISSION ------

"THE GOOD FAIRY" (Universal, 1934; released 1935)  
Directed by William Wyler; produced by Henry Hamigson; script by Preston Sturges from the play by Pereno Molnar; camera, Norbert Brodine; edited by Daniel Mandell; 10 reels  

More than a dozen Molnar properties were brought to the screen by Hollywood, primarily in the 30's. Few of them were successful enough to inspire remakes, though oddly enough there were three versions of "The Swan," the Good Fairy" was remade, and quite recognisably so, "The Guardsman" in 1958; "Thelma Too's" in 1947 on with Tom Drake trying vainly to emulate Herbert Marshall! On the whole, Hollywood was too much in awe of Molnar to do right by him: only "The Guardsman" could be considered a total success, and that because it had the wit not to swamp itself in over-production and leave most of the work to the artistry and superb timing of the Lunts. "The Good Fairy" is a typically over-produced work, and one must admit - seen in the isolation of a private screening - a somewhat disappointing one. Yet with all its flaws, it does seem to spring to life with an audience, its mistakes largely covered by the elegance of playing and setting. It was apparently produced under difficulties and behind schedule; Sturges' script was constructed while the film was shooting, which accounts for its uneven quality and the sometimes excessive footage devoted to Frank Morgan's buffoonery. But not all the blame is Sturges'; too many of his early scripts were handed to directors (like Mitchell Leisen) who deadened his wit, and William Wyler, for all his class and elegance, isn't quite the Lubitsch that this film really needs. Nevertheless its good things - especially the earlier scenes at the orphanage... and the priceless moments in a gigantic movie theatre - plus of course its marvellous cast - are quite enough to keep us happy in an age when such charm is a rarity indeed. -- WKB --