THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES TWELVE: Program 2
December 3, 1971

"THURSDAY'S CHILD" (Associated British Picture Cbrn., 1943)
Written and directed by Rodney Ackland, from the novel by Donald Macardee; Produced by John Argyle; Camera, Desmond Dickinson; Music by Charles Williams; 79 minutes.
With: Sally Ann Howes, Wilfrid Lawton, Stewart Granger, Kathleen O'Leary, Eileen Bennett, Marianne Davis, Felix Aylmer, Gerhardt Kempinski, Percy Walsh, Margaret Drummond, Ronald Shiner, Anthony Holles, Vera Boretti, Margaret Yarde.

Rodney Ackland was one of the more enterprising and certainly most enthusiastic British film-makers of the 40's; playwright, actor, director, scenarist, film society impresario, he was something of a lesser-league home-grown Orson Welles. His talent was perhaps not a major one - although in fairness, it never had a real proving ground - and his career was littered with disappointments. "Thursday's Child" might well have been the film to establish him as a new directorial talent of note, but the production company (always a very conservative one) lost confidence in the venture half-way through and cut the budget, making a number of economical short cuts necessary; furthermore, although the emerging film was a very good one, they denied it a press-screening. It was thus discovered too late by the public and the critics for its commercial future to be helped in any way. It was never released in the United States, although it does now get spasmodic exposure on TV. Ackland's whole career - including a brief association with D.W. Griffith in the 30's - is a fascinating one, and to anybody interested I can recommend his very readable autobiography, "The Celluloid Mistress", not easily available now but often to be found at the bookshops specialising in older film material. "Thursday's Child" is an unpretentious film, but an honest one and rather a charming one; it paints a realistic picture of a certain strata of English life, and a satiric but also generally honest one of British film industry life. There are some exaggerated stereotypes perhaps - but then people in the film business are tend to live up to their accepted stereotypes! The simplicity of storytelling isn't always matched by simplicity of style; in a kind of homage to Griffith, Ackland does on occasion resort to the device of the iris-out in lieu of the fade or the dissolve. If the characters, situations, and especially that of Wilfrid Lawton (seemingly a kind of modern version of the tyrannical Victorian father) seem a little unreal at times, let me assure you that for Britain in the 40's, such is actually not the case. The position of the family depicted - humble by American standards perhaps - would actually by British standards be a secure and respected one, so that the father's lack of patience with his family's dissatisfaction would be more or less justified. Sally Ann Howes, best remembered for "Dead of Night" and as Julie Andrews' Broadway successor in "My Fair Lady", and Stewart Granger, both went on to major stardom; cameraman Dickinson graduated to major director status; only Rodney Ackland, creator of the film, failed to benefit from it and remained a distinguished but generally uncelebrated scenarist.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

"HANGMAN'S HOUSE" (Fox, 1929) Directed by John Ford
Scenario by Marion Orth and Philip Klein, from a story by Donna Byrnes; Photographed by Malcolm Stuart Boylan; Camera: George Schneiderman; 71 minutes.
With Victor McLaglen, June Collyer, Hobart Bosworth, Larry Kent, Earle Fox, Eric Wayne, Joseph Benke, Belle Stoddard, Mary Gordon, Jack Pennick, John Wayne. MUSIC ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART ODEMAN.

John Ford's last major silent, this is a curious collection of various styles, with a nod to the pictorial expressionism brought to Fox from Germany by F.W. Murnau, and at the same time a look forward to the styles that Ford would emerge on his much later Irish films "The Quiet Man" and "The Informer". Basically a rather old-fashioned melodrama, it's not the kind of film that was really Ford's forte, and the finished film shows several changes in construction and characterisation from the original scenario, changes presumably made by Ford. Yet its great pictorial beauty (the film is entirely studio-made) more than redresses Ford's frequent statements that films like this were "just a job of work" to him, calling for no more than good workmanship. No director who didn't really care about his craft would bother to include shots of a tree (yet totally extraneous) tracking shot along the banks of the (studio-created) river in the closing episodes. Apart from Earle Fox - a wonderful villain of the old school, but whose facial tugging does rather stand out amidst the rest of the cast (perhaps because he generally subtle underlaying of the rest of the cast, perhaps because he generally subtle underlaying of the rest of the cast, perhaps because he generally subtle underlaying of the rest of the cast), particularly as an ultra-enthusiastic spectator in the horse-race sequences.

--- Mr. X. Peterson ---