**FILM SERIES FIFTEEN: Program 6**

November 10, 1972

**An Evening of Unforgettable Villainy**

"CRIMES AT THE DARK HOUSE" (British Lion, 1940) Produced and directed by George King; adapted by Frederick Hayward from "The Woman in White" by Wilkie Collins; scenario by Edward Dryhurst; Assistant Director, Halliwell; Camera, Ron Grahamming; 70 mins.

With Tod Slaughter, Hilary Evans, Sylvia Field, Geoffrey Wardwell, Hay Petrie, Margaret Yarde, Rita Grant, David Horne, Elsie Magstaff, David Keir.

Boris Karloff, Ernest Torrence, Gustav von Seyffertitz and Lowell Sherman all rolled into one, Tod Slaughter was Britain's most unique resident villain. He specialised, on stage as well as on film, in the ripe old Victorian melodramas which were played straight enough, and with genuine fire, to be tolerable as the real article, but also with just enough tongue in cheek to be taken as broad comedy. The trick was that only Slaughter himself occasionally hammered it up for comic effect; for the rest, the creaky plots were presented in deadly earnest, and so were the performances. Slaughter seemed to use only veteran hands, who could play it in the authentic old style, or up-and-coming young players who, in their desire to please and create an impression, never quite realised how their inexperience was being exploited. Of all the dashing young men and damsel young ladies who were Tod's heroes and heroines, only -ric Portman escaped the fate of wantonly innocuousness. Just as Duster Keaton used absurdly stupid heroines so did Slaughter use absurdly vicious ones, the better to repudiate his icierous advances. Surprisingly, audiences (in Britain at any rate) managed to take the dozen or so Slaughter films in exactly the right spirit; certainly they were amused by them, often moved to hiss the villain and cheer outrageous heroines, but they never went to them with the sole purpose of laughing at them. And for all their melodramatics, Slaughter's films often had quite chilling moments in them, deriving mainly from the original tales, the often surprisingly unpredictable villainy (Tod started odd and breaking the crime of an unsuspecting tot) and Slaughter's bravura playing. Director George King, associated with all of Tod's films as producer and nearly always director, was at best an efficient journeyman director, whose few "big" films smacked of being second-echelon Herbert Wilcox. "Crimes at the Dark House" - somewhat reshaped from Collins' original, to give the subsidiary character of Sir Percival Clyde the villainous lead - is the best and the most elaborate of the Slaughter vehicles, giving full rein to an astonishing cavalcade of laughably and inventive methods of murder. Thereafter, production was spasmodic and invariably by a much cheaper company. Slaughter died some 15 years ago, his last acting work being on the right side of the law as a Scotland Yard detective in a British tv series. UCLA in Hollywood discovered Tod some few years back and started a minor "post-Cost cult for his films; should such a thing happen at the New School, we have several of his very best vintage films available for future series.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

"KONGO" ( MGM 1932) Directed by William Cwen; scenario by Leon Gordon from a story by Chester Daniel and Kilbourn Gordon; Camera, Harold Rosson; 85 m. With Walter Huston, Luce Velez, Conrad Nagel, Virginia Bruce, C. Henry Gordon, Mitchell Lewis, Forrester Harvey, Curtis Hero.

This infinitely superior remake of the slow and ponderous Lon Chaney/Tod Browning silent "West of Zanzibar" must surely hold some kind of record for being about the nastiest and most depraved (albeit entertainingly so) piece of melodramatic hokum ever filmed. I don't want to go into its plot, for surprise (or shock?) is one of its major stocks-in-trade. Suffice it to say that the permissively screen of today can't hold a candle to the subtler and less explicit cinema of yesterday. The difference of course is one of approach and perspective: today's films regale us with the jolly little perversions happening next door in our own home town, whereas "Kongo" makes no attempt to bid for audience "identification". It's rich - and totally detached, as far away from life as Culver City is from the Kongo. Taken in the right spirit - a spirit accidentally quite akin to that of the Tod Slaughter film - it's a refreshingly satiric role rather than a talentless piece of old-fashioned melodrama. Tod or Huston plays it to the hilt as also - unfortunately - does Conrad Nagel, normally an extremely able and restrained actor. The plot and performances - and the art direction - quite overshadow the nominal efforts of a not too distinguished director, William Cwen, a jack-of-all-trades who directed foreign versions for MGM in the early sound era, did scripts, graduated to directing lete, and declined quickly. "Kongo" was his biggest film, and also his last major one. The following year he did an Oliver Twist" for Monogram (most of its quite good quality was probably due to producer Herbert Brenon) and then a real poverty-row quickie for the Goldstone Company.

--- William K. Everson ---