Two Early Talkies Directed by William Wyler

As with so many directors who in later years became associated with box-office blockbuster and "prestige" films (and Robert Wise is a more recent example) William Wyler seems to have done his best work (filmically, if not commercially) in a fairly brief transition period between relative minor and "A" features. Like John Ford a decade before him, Wyler polished his craft in two-reel Westerns at Universal, graduated to programmer films, and having demonstrated his expertise, was rewarded with increasingly more important pictures. In later years, Wyler tended to specialize (especially for Sam Goldwyn) in the rather over-produced prestige special adapted from novel or play ("Muthering Heights", "Dead End", "The Letter", "Ben Hur") and his most filmic attribute -- a sense of movement and pacing - all but deserted him. He was also an adherent of the George Stevens' school of film-making - that of filming slowly and methodically, grabbing alternate and protection shots beyond the call of duty, and thus from a plethora of footage being able to later fashion a coldly "perfect" work. It is this method that causes Stevens' "Shane" to date so much today; while Ford's are flawed but also more spontaneous westerns retain all their vigor and beauty. If one can judge by such books as Charles Bickford's autobiography, Wyler always espoused this method to a degree, and his 1930 "Hell's Heroes" was apparently shot under such a system. But the kind of film that Wyler was making then, and the extra-conscientious budgets at Universal, presumably prevented the over-use, let alone abuse, of such rather mathematical methods. Tonight's two films represent a crossroads in Wyler's career. Although brief and still partially melodramatic, "A House Divided" was his most serious work to that time, a major step forward from his generally light-weight output from the mid-20's on of westerns, romantic comedies and action melodrama. "Counselor at Law," was his move into the big-time, with a top theatrical property and a big star. It also established him as, together with James Whale, Universal's best contract director.

A HOUSE DIVIDED (Universal, 1931; released 1932) Director: William Wyler
Screenplay by John E. Clymer, Dale Van Every and John Huston from Olive Edens' story "Mute Heart and Hand"; Camera, Charles Stumar; NY premiere at the Broadway Theatre, January 1932. 70 minutes.

Well received in 1932 as an "intelligent" film, this Eugene O'Neill-inspired work holds up extremely well as a film, perhaps a little less well as a drama. Perhaps because Universal catered so much to an action market, the melodramatic momentum of the story is slightly over-stressed, and it is odd indeed to see Walter Huston (in a film virtually paralleling his "Dead Legs" play in that same year's "Kong") (incidentally in a recent New School series). In fact, since there is a ten-month gap between the two films, one can safely assume that it was Huston's success in this film that suggested to MGM that they put Huston into a similar role in the remake of the old Lon Chaney thriller. The fishing village locale is cunningly and realistically achieved by a combination of studio and location work, and the film is constantly good to look at. It even has (rare for 1931) some sparse but effective use of incidental music. The plot is a curious continuation of that cycle that seemed to fascinate Hollywood in the late 20's and early 30's -- "The Canadian" "White Gold" "City Girl" "The Mind" and others -- stories of contrast and adjustment, gentility against the elements, stories too that allowed often self-indulgent and art-conscious directors to concentrate on mood and subtlety of performance rather than on really strong story-lines. The plot here, with more than a few overlappings into "They Knew What They Wanted", is fairly predictable but interestingly done, well by John Huston as the dialogue-writer) and generally well acted, though Douglas Montgomery's "sensitivity" is a bit overdone. The brief comic inserts (the under-played vignette with the wooden leg for example) are used rightly as mere punctuation in the plot, his characters and his camera constantly on the move. It's a surprisingly fast film for 1931, with much of the look of the best Clarence Brown films of the mid-20's. In fact, Wyler's composition of the frame, with the constant stress on position of the three protagonists (particularly in the climactic scene where first one and then another character is emphasized, or leaves the frame entirely) suggests that Wyler had remembered Brown's pictorial handling of a similar situation in the silent "Smouldering Fires". Only in the climax does the film disappoint dramatically. There's a whole of a storm sequence, with all of Universal's brilliant expertise in special effects, model work, and Frankensteinnian thunder-flashes. Unfortunately, the storm doesn't solve the problems: it merely obliterates them quickly! 
The film has been so good until that point that one's expectations for a more mature ending were high. But if one can fault it for scenario shortcomings, one needn't apologize for it as a Wyler film. And Wyler has no great reputation preceding it, it can and should be viewed not as a major re-discovery, but rather as an enjoyable substantiation of Wyler as one of the most interesting and vigorous of the newer directors in the early sound period.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

COUSINELLO AT LAW (Universal, 1933) Director: William Wyler.
Screenplay by Elmer Rice, from his own original play; Camera, Howard Brodine; Art Direction, Charles D. Hall. 80 minutes

With: John Barrymore, Bebe Daniels, Dora Kenyon, Onslow Stevens, Helvyn Douglas, Jason Robards, Jr., Thelma Todd, Jaye Throop, Kervin Clme, Conway Nashburn, John Qualen, John Gorman, John Hammond Daelly, Halke Kornstein, Angela Jacobs, Clara Langner, T.H. Hennings, Elmer Brown, Barbara Perry, Richard Quine, Victor Adams, Freideric Burton, Vincent Sherman, George Humbert, Jack Kanner. (Cast list with character-identification will be displayed at the rear of the hall.)

N.Y. premiere: Radio City Music Hall, December 7th 1933.

Briefly, released in the very early 1950's, never released to tv, "Cousinello at Law" has been unavailable for some 20 years due to legal complications, and it's good to see that after that long hiatus it hasn't lost any of its values: it's still top Wyler and top Barrymore. This latter is perhaps a little surprising, for it was made at a low spot in Barrymore's career and private life. Despite his ultra-burcolic screen work in the early 30's (or perhaps because of it) his name was losing box-office potency. His third marriage was a wreck, and he was drinking heavily. His last long-term starring contract (at MGM) had ended with "Night Flight," "Cousinello at Law" was his first film on a single-picture contract, and it was followed by the first "Mr. Skeffington," "Lost Horizon," "Two Rode Together," etc. Reportedly, for the first time he had serious trouble with his lines - and Gene Fowler in his book "Good Night Sweet Prince" tells of one harrowing night when (after completion of the film) Barrymore was called back for a simple re-take, fluffed it 56 times in a row, and went grimly home. (Footnote: Barrymore got no sleep that night since he was called to the home of his friend John Gilbert, upset and threatening suicide. After calming his friend, Barrymore showered, changed, returned to the studio and did the scene - the one with John Qualen - perfectly, on the first take!) Fortuitously, the very nature of the role paralleled Barrymore's own state of mind. Whether the role "covered" him, or whether he was still a great enough actor to overcome his personal problems while before the camera is open to question. Perhaps it hardly matters, for no matter how it was achieved, it remains one of his finest, most dynamic and certainly most poignant performances. Admittedly, for a star of his magnitude and a role of that type, there is a dearth of closeup work, and none of those slowly-building, two-mood speeches that were so fashionable in the theatre at that time. Fortunately, Wyler found a way to do his role, and, to his credit, faster, to use frequent cutaways, to keep the camera from concentrating too much on Barrymore. But in view of the restricted setting of the play - and while there are several opportunities to "open it up" and get outside, it stays rigidly within the confines of the Barrymore law offices - this too is a good thing, for it keeps it constantly and almost artificially alive. Few stage plays have been changed so little, yet have become so eminently cinematic at the same time. And of course it was a good play to begin with. Despite the fact that almost every character is a theatrical stereotype, placed there to perform a specific function, they are all used and moved so well that they all work. The only characters that really date are the two Jewish mothers, perhaps because in the intervening years they have become such over-used and aggressive stereotypes in ethnic drama and comedy on stage, screen, radio and tv and even in night-clubs. To use a dreadful (but useful) nun, the two Jewish mothers in the film are maida steins around the necks of their long-suffering sons - but luckily there isn't enough of them to be irritating. Perhaps it is because the Jewish background of the play, while still obvious, is not explicit - their constant use of ethnic phrases - has been softened from the original play (which starred Paul Muni, had John Qualen in the same role, and launched John Garfield as the young Communist agitator) whereas the more obvious sentimental usage of the two mothers is un diluted, and reminds us far more than with the other characters of their theatrical quality. Barrymore's performance towers over all, but Bebe Daniels reminds us again what an excellent straight actress she could be, and Dora Kenyon is so graceful and lady-like it's almost a pity that she is cast as a battlers - William K. Everson.

LAST MINUTE CRISIS NOTE: As we suspected and forecasted in our tentative schedule issued last December, THE LAST WARNING, booked for March 16, is not available and won't be. Despite Universal's assurances on that point. Our apologies for the disappointment; a substitute will be announced next week.