THE NEW SCHOOL FILM SERIES SIXTEEN: Program #6

March 16 1973

MURDER BY THE CLOCK (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Edward Sloman
Screenplay by Henry Myers from an original story by Rufus King and Charles Breenah; Camera, Karl Struss; 75 minutes

"Murder by the Clock" created quite an impact on its original release, perhaps because it drew atmosphere from the horror films then so prevalent to beef up the generally rather prosaic quality of the talkative mystery films of the day. Those who saw it then remember it fondly still, and it is one of the most requested "little" films since our New School series began. That it does date and doesn't live up to one's memories was perhaps to be expected, but it didn't matter when the film was designed to be shown in tandem with a related genre film. Leni's "The Last Warning", with the unreliability of "The Last Warning" (after its booking and confirmation) the rug was somewhat yanked out from under "Murder by the Clock", and with a possibly different audience, or at least a split audience, reaction to it is hard to anticipate. It is slowly-paced, and the total lack of any incidental music emphasizes that. On the other hand, it is also very much of a "fun" movie. The plot and characters are colorful and unrestrained - especially Lilian Tashman's novel, modern Lady Macbeth clad in precariously derriere-hugging evening gowns - that of Eunice Merrick (art direction, sets, camerawork) it is handsome and impressive. The Tashman performance prevents it from being taken too seriously - but on the other hand, without her tongue-in-cheek villainy, it would be a good deal less diverting. The romantic cutaways between Roris Toomey and Sally O'Neil are virtually just that - editorial cutaways - and luckily they don't get in the way of the enjoyable parade of murder, madness and wanderings in the family crypt.

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS: "The Man Who Laughs" (Universal, 1928) Directed by Paul Leni
Production supervisor: Paul Kohner; story supervisor, Dr. Bela Skalessy; Scenario by J. Grubb, Alexander assisted by Charles Whittaker, Marion Ward and Kay MacLean from the novel by Victor Hugo; Camera, Gilbert Harrenon; Art Director, Charles D. Hall; Costumes, David Cox and Vera West; editors, Maurice Pivar and Edward Cahn; Assistant Directors, Louis Friedlander (Lew Landers), Jay Marchant, John Voshall. 110 mins.
With: Conrad Veidt (Owynplaine), Mary Philbin (Dea), Olga Baclanova (Duchess Josiana), Josephine Crowell (Queen Anne), George Siegmann (Dr. Hardquannome), Brandon Hurst (Barkilphedo), Sal de Grasse (King James), Stuart Holmes (Lord Dirry-Noire) Cessare Crevina (Ursus), Nick de Ruiz (Wapentake), Edgar Norton (Chancellor), Torben Meyer (The Spy), Julius Holmar Jr. (Owynplaine as a child), Charles Puffy (Imkeeper), Frank Fuglia, Jack Goodrich (clowns), Carmen Costello (Dea's mother); Zimbo the Dog (Homo the Wolf), and Lon Poff.

Made between Leni's "The Cat and the Canary" ('27) and "The Last Warning" ('28), "The Man Who Laughs" was a product of Hollywood's and especially Universal's most European - dominated German-influenced period. Paul Fejos was another "prestige" import director working on a lot (his "The Last Performance" also with Veidt and Philbin was quite interesting) and even Universal's "B" westerns had a visually Germanic look to them. "The Man Who Laughs" was an obvious attempt to duplicate the success of Universal's earlier Hugo adaptation, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame", and as a film was far superior to it - but it lacked its popular appeal, and also lacked the grandeur and magnificence of Leni's film. In an attempt to popularise the more mature Hugo story, there were several deviations from the original, including a happy ending and a lack of the swashbuckling action leading up to it. A Movietone (sound on film) score was also added to help along its boxoffice chances. Sometimes the score works well, sometimes it is lazy (a constant use of "British Grandirors" to try to reinforce the illusion that the wholly Germanic sets represent England of the 17th century), sometimes derivative (wholesale use of the scenes from Hurreau's 'Sunrise' in the same context) and once disastrous. Once or occasionally, the idea of a vocal as a last-reel wrap-up, but the intrusion of Ernő Rápe's "When Love Came Into an early and very fragile love-scene is a deplorable lapse in taste. Sound effects and roar noises are sometimes out of proportion too. Though long and slow, it is however an incredibly good film to look at: a marvellous prologue, borrowings from Griffith as well as the Germans throughout, and an unsurpassed mixture of sensuality and animal passion in the remarkable scene of Baclanova's attempted seduction of Veidt. Incidentally, a few years ago a big, elaborate remake was planned by Kirk Douglas - who presumably would have played the lead with a minimum of makeup - but was called off when he was finally able to track down and screen a copy of this Universal original.