NIGHT WORLD (Universal; 1932) Directed by Hobart Henley
Screenplay by Richard Schayer from an original story by Allen Rivkin and P.J. Wolfson; Camera, Merritt Gerstad; Dances staged by Busby Berkeley;
Musical Score, Alfred Newman; Editor, Ted Kent; 6 reels

The current very handsome Busby Berkeley dismisses "Night World" in a rather cavalier fashion (the authors obviously not having seen it) by commenting that its very short length made it of no interest or value for either theatrical or TV revival - a statement somewhat hard to swallow in view of the number of quality 60 minute movies ("The Haven", "The Hawk of the Vampire", "Dumbo") that have found length no deterrent to successful revival. The real reason for the film's long absence (for some 40 years) is that it appears to have been lost in this country, not coming to light even in Universal's belated but systematic searching of their vaults to come up with such other forgotten films as "OK America", "The Impatient Halden" and "Resurrection".
Be assured from the beginning that "Night World" is no rediscovered masterpiece. It's a sturdy and serviceable little film, but its main interest lies in its use of varied talents still only on the threshold of success: Lew Ayres, still trying to find the right niche to sustain the impetus and impact of his "All Quiet on the Western Front"; Karloff, in his biggest immediate post-"Frankenstein" role, still trying hoodlums (not too convincing) with his own dead British accent, and perhaps here trying a shade too hard to make the character three-dimensional. Shortly after the same year, "The Old Dark House", "The Mummy" and "The Mask of Fu Manchu" would establish him permanently as a front-rank horror star; and of course Busby Berkeley, some musical experimenting behind him, but still awaiting the musical boom via Goldwyn and Warners that would give him prestige, freedom - and budgets. Most of his musical sequences here are restricted to plot-interpolated rehearsal scenes, but there is a full-blown number close to the beginning of the film that is an interesting forerunner of his "Young and Healthy" number from "42nd Street". It is a small-scale number, as befits the slightly shabby night-club in which it takes place, but he makes the most of his handful of girls, and gets in some typical overhead pattern effects.

"Night World" is clearly an attempt to both jump the gun on "Grand Hotel" (filmed earlier, released later) and to repeat the success of Universal's own "Broadway" -- on a quick, wholly economical basis. In some ways its restricted budget gives it a seedy realism denied to the much more elaborate "Broadway", and with its snappy dialogue and multiplicity of characters, it certainly keeps the pace moving. In fact - though this isn't necessarily high praise - it is probably the best film of that not-too-distinguished director Hobart Henley, whose career spanned silents and early talkies. In fact, it was his last major sound film; after a two-year hiatus, only the quite interesting independent quickie "The Unknown Blonde" (1934) was to follow. Since no printing material is known to exist in this country, our print tonight came from Europe, where lab work is sometimes not of the best. Since this is not a film of Sternbergian pictorial splendors or devastatingly witty dialogue, the often lack-lustre quality of the print is not a handicap. In fact, since the action never leaves the night-club, and practically everybody in the film is in the throes of some kind of despair, the slightly grey and harsh "look" of the print is perhaps even a subliminal asset.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

DANTE'S INFERNO (Fox, 1935) Directed by Harry Lachman; produced by Sol M. Wurtzel; Screenplay by Philip Klein and Robert W. Yost; Camera, Rudolph Mate; Sets and design, Hal E. Foy; Musical score by Samuel Anderegg; Musical arrangements by Edward Kreska; Editing by Joe Corso; 7 reels

The last and most elaborate of Spencer Tracy's 20 films for Fox (1930-1935) before moving to MGM. "Dante's Inferno" is a marvelously typical example of the Hollywood "audience" picture of the thirties. It was made at a time
when Hollywood had achieved a peak in technical skill and artistry, but
was also very much aware of its "responsibility" to entertain a mass
audience. Thus the most advanced of creative skills lie here somewhat
uneasily with trite and predictable scripting, in which there is convenient-
ly something for just about everyone — action, romance, spectacle, pathos,
allegory, moral uplift, music. The picture goes off in several directions,
and the only word which can tie it all together into a cohesive whole is
"hokum." And that it is, but fine, full-blooded, unsophisticated hokum,
with something of the same joy in exciting and exhilarating audiences that
one finds in the current Kung-Fu movies (which alas have no artistry or
skills to back up that exhilaration!) As a further example of the film's
desire to please all corners (and Fox were especially adept at that,
tacking on showmanlike climaxes of fires and disasters to the most mundane
of plots!) is the fact that originally Tracy was supposed to die at the
end of the film, and all indications are that this idea was maintained
throughout the shooting. Then, a last-minute one-liner and fadeout leaves
him broke but happy, finally having seen the light, his total poverty a
somewhat minor exaltation for the trail of suicides, wrecked lives,
accidental deaths and wholesale destruction that he has left in his wake:
its morality and its structure somewhat resemble the DeMille films of the
early 20's, and is as old-fashioned as they were -- but a good deal more
entertaining.

It is of course the parade of thrill sequences and special effects
episodes that make the most striking impression, and their sheer artistry
immediately lifts the film well out of the programmer category. The long
Inferno sequence (usually shorn of its more erotic moments in heavily cut
versions, and still effective in the latest theatrical release some 20 years ago)
is a magnificent sequence, created originally for the silent film in 1923 and
was once believed — lifted out of Fox's silent film of the same name (which
itself lifted most of the footage from a none-too-expert Italian film).
Much of the credit for this sequence should go to the curiously unbilled
Ben Carre, one of the finest and most original art directors in the
industry, a one-time associate of the great Maurice Tourneur. It's a
superb sequence, interweaving full-scale action with brilliant miniatures,
and some good and some bad trick work. The final fire sequence too,
inspired by the Morro Castle disaster and later incorporated into the
allegorical parallels with the Well scenes, is a lulu. If the fire seems to
swallow up the ship all too rapidly, and if the camera tilts at the first
hint of disaster (just as it did as soon as Kong broke loose in Madison
Square Garden) what of it? For the sake of showmanship and effective
melodrama, one can afford to stretch the confines of logic a little!
The camera work by the way is the work of Rudolph Mate, Carl Dreyer's
former cinematographer, and later a solid director of thrillers and good
melodramas himself.

With the rest of the film, it is however difficult — and
pointless — to try to allocate credits, and it emerges as something of a
tribute to the collected artisans and craftsmen who worked on it under
the old studio contract system. The brief dance sequence with Rita
Hayworth is a good example: it is literally one of the best dances ever
filmed, graceful, sensuous, full of sweeping movements. It is splendidly
delivered, beautifully photographed, well choreographed, expertly performed.
It hardly matters whether editor de Casetano, director Lachman (an interesting
but curiously erratic film-maker), cameraman Mate or Miss Hayworth
are involved in dominant or limited capacities; together they have created
a fine sequence. (Director Lachman in any case was a production associate
on Rex Ingram's silent "The Magician," which likewise had a powerful and
imaginatively conceived Inferno sequence — echoes of which are certainly
to be found here). The entrance to the Inferno sideshow at the fair
ground bears a quite astonishing resemblance to the temple set in the
silent Italian "Cahbrina"; the music in the inferno "vow" scenes was later
reconstructed to serve as the mournful dirge of the slaves in "Slave
Ship"; Fox's standing liner set (from "Cavalcade") is pressed into useful
service once more; all of these things reminding us once more how much
films draw on their predecessors — influence their successors — and also,
sadly, how this reservoir of experience and influence seems to have been
dissipated since the 1950's, when the old studio contract system and
continuous teamwork began to disappear.

The cast by the way, is likewise a reminder of what a wealth of talent lay
in the old studio rosters of extras and character players. Some fairly
respectable names appear in surprisingly small roles, once or twice only
in crowd scenes, suggesting that the film was probably quite extensively
cut to get it down to a nice, comfortable, commercial 65 minute length.

William K. Everson