THE NEW YORK FILM SERIES 15: Program #3
October 19, 1923

THE HOLE IN THE WALL (Paramount, 1929) Directed by Robert Florey;
supervised by Monta Bell; Screenplay by Pierre Collings from the 1920
play by Fred Jackson; Camera, George Folsey; Editor, Lloyd Innes.

With Claudette Colbert, Edward O. Robinson, David Powell, Wellee Savage,
Donald Peck, Alan Brooks, Louise Closer, Hale, Katherine Emmett, M. Carra
Caro, Barry Naccollum, George MacQuarrie, Helen Crane, The Camby Hall Girls.

Clearly the main interest today (for the majority of the audience) in a film
like "The Hole in the Wall" is vested in the early work of its two stars.
Both Claudette Colbert and Edward C. Robinson give performances that are
both assured and typical; indeed Robinson's work in several crime films of
1929/30 is so dynamic that it's somewhat of a mystery as to why he was so
little exploited in his heyday of sound, and also a bit puzzling that when a
really meaty part came along — "Little Caesar" in late 1930 -
Robinson attacked it with understandable gusto, but also a good deal less
subtlety than he had exhibited hitherto. However, the main — and perhaps
essentially academic — interest in "The Hole in the Wall" is as an early
Robert Florey film, and as an example of the decidedly awkward transitional film
in that period-when talkies were obviously here to stay, but silents
hadn't yet disappeared. Florey, working out of Paramount's Astoria studios,
made some extremely varied films in 1929, ranging from the Marx Brothers'
"Coconuts" to Gertrude Lawrence's "The Battle of Paris" and tonight's film.
While later he was to become a specialist in super-stylish "B" films, as
witness "The Preview Murder Mystery" two weeks back, here he was still much
interested in the avant-garde film (viz "The Life and Death of a Hollywood
Extra") and in bringing to his feature films experimental elements and
decided traces of German decor and design. A relatively unimportant film
commercially, and made by a studio not really fully equipped for sound
production, "The Hole in the Wall" is a technically crude production even
for its day. (Manuilian's "Amphor" was a much more polished production
from the same studio, though admittedly made six months later). Much of
"The Hole in the Wall" is shot totally silent, and the mute voicing of
dialogue, unbecked even by music, is often prolonged and obvious. Even
less acceptable is the train wreck engineered with obvious toys - one can
hardly dignify them by calling them miniatures or models - which creates a
ludicrous effect, especially from the man of Florey's proven professionalism.
Since its claim to realism is nil, one must assume that Florey was trying for
a stylized effect (not unlike those in "Hollywood Extra") and that at
that time, mechanical execution just could not measure up to conception.
Its plot is a very strange one, much in the Tod Browning mould - with
indeed such typical Browning flaws as a failure to realise the full
potential suggested by bizarre but only casually sketched in characters
*or incidents. (It had been filmed before, as a 1921 silent, though not by
Browning). For all of its crudities though, "The Hole in the Wall" is a
much more fascinating and "alive" film than many of the more professional
talkies of 1929, such as the hugely successful "Marseilles". It's those
several sequences of stylised direction and two such notable near-debut
performances, it's an intriguing curiosity. One need make no apologies for
it or its revival - especially since it may well be the only revival
it will get.

... 10 Minute Intermission ...

"OKAY AMERICA" (Universal, 1932) Directed by Tay Garnett; Screenplay by
William Anthony McGuire and Scott Pembroke; Camera, Arthur Miller; 8 reels
With Lew Ayres, Margaret O'Sullivan, Louis Calhern, Walter Catlett, Alan
Dinehart, Edward Arnold, Rollo Lloyd, Margaret Lindsay, Wallace Clarke, Nance
O'Neill, Frederic Burton, Frank Sheridan, Marjorie Gateson, Henry Armetta,
George Dow Clark, Paerson Tracy, Berton Churchill, Ruth Lyons, Frank Darien,
Onslow Stevens, James Flavin, Al Hill, William Daly, Neely Edwards, Caryl
Lincoln, The 3 Cheers, The Bluettes, Everett Roagland's Orchestra, Frank
Hagney, Lloyd Ingraham, Akin Tamiroff, Harry Strang, Tom London, Allard
Robertson, Ed Fiel, Gilbért Emery, Virginia Dauell.

By pure coincidence, our screening of this fine film, and "Slave Ship" in a
couple of weeks, coincides with the publication of director Tay Garnett's
autobiography, and the NY Cultural Centre's cycle of Garnett films (not
including the two that we are showing) -- so that anybody interested in a
clash course on Garnett's career has a head start over the current two
week period.

"Okay America" is one of several (principally 1932) films, mainly comedies
though some, like this one, strong melodramas, that sought to cash in on
or satirise the wave of excitement, interest (and sometimes resentment)
that columnist/radio commentator Walter Winchell was causing at the time.
Though an elaborate, handsome production, "Okay America" seems at first to
lack the staccato pace than an equivalent Warner film would have had and too, Lew Ayres seems entirely too gentle and likeable to even survive in, let alone dominate, the dog-eat-dog world that was the Winchell milieu, and probably still would be if we still had columnists with his fire and color instead of all the John Simons and Pete Hamills. However, these are not so much flaws as misconceptions -- there's no reason why a Universal film should look like a Warner film, and in time it finds its own pace and sets out to tell an increasingly startling story.

"Okay America" is one of those Fascist/Crime films of the early 30's which, because California has always been somewhat of a law unto itself and the closest the U.S. has ever had to a police state, itself advocates through its movies police state methods. We've already shown a number of the more striking films in this genre: "This Day and Age", "Gabriel Over the White House" and "The Star Witness" among them. Wellman's "The President Vanishes" was another notable film in a group when even overlapped into comedy - perhaps most surprisingly into Harold Lloyd's "The Cat's Paw". Some day this group of films should provide a fascinating cycle in itself, to include - hopefully - some of the doctored European versions as well. The European version of "Gabriel Over the White House" was radically different from the American version, as well it should have been if America wanted to retain European nations as its friends and allies!

"Okay America" is even a little more startling than most in that it clearly identifies its period, and thus there can be no doubt that the President ultimately involved is P.D.A. Since the President seems willing to go along with law and order only if the law backs him up - at which time he'll bring in a goon squad to enforce law and order without benefit of red tape it is certainly putting its convictions on the line even more than films like "Gabriel Over the White House" and "The Star Witness" which avoided specific identifiable Presidential intervention by escaping into ruses or fantasy. As so often in these films - and in a totally different way in the Frank Capra films - one does feel a little sorry for the villains. In their own way, they're much more honest than the politicians they deal with, and they get a decidedly dirty deal in the end. One also half suspects that the country might be better run under their corrupt efficiency than under the honest inefficiency of the idealists who seek their overthrow.

"Okay America" was remade, surprisingly well, as a Universal programmer in the late 30's. Titled "Risky Business", it starred George Murphy in the Ayres role, and Eduardo Ciannelli as the villain. Political motivations were removed, but the basic plot remained unchanged - even to the decidedly off-beat ending.

--- Wm. K. Everson

NOTICE REGARDING NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAM

Ann Loring, co-star with Warner Baxter in "Robin Hood of El Dorado", will be on hand next week to join in the post-screening discussion of the film, and answer any questions. In view of this interesting addition, I plan to precede the film with all or part of a filmed interview with its director, William Wellman. Since the program will thus run longer than normal, and justifiably so, we will begin the first film promptly at 8:00 without introductory comment.