THE NEW SCHOOL  
FILM SERIES 23: Program #2  
October 10, 1975

"THE COUNTRY DOCTOR" (20th Century Fox, 1936) Directed by Henry King  
Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; screenplay by Sonya Levien from a story by Charles E. Blake; Camera, John Seitz; Daniel B. Clark; 9 reels  

20th Century Fox, which already had Shirley Temple and Jane Withers under contract, to say nothing of Jane Darwell, Buck the dog and the Jones Family, scored something of a gooney coup in 1936 by making a deal for the services of the famous Five-Finger Dionne Quintuplets. (Had Will Rogers not died the year before, he would doubtless have been the Doctor of the title!) The Country Doctor} ignored the official stars and featured prestige director Henry King in its advertising, to boost itself as "the first five-star picture" and to sell the Dionnes. The results must have been disconcerting, since the mothers of the nation must have felt rather put upon at having to wait until the end of the film for the tots even to be referred to, although admittedly they are given a generous - possibly too generous - hunk of footage once they arrive. Conversely, more serious devotees of King Americana were strictly speaking "Canadiana"; it comes at one of King's Americana peaks, right after "Old MacDonald's Farm" and "Down East", and prior to "Ramona"} may well have been put off by the advertising. Nevertheless, some pictures delivered the goods rather more as advertised, but they were strictly formula programmers. The Country Doctor} (not a remake of the deMille silent) looks like an old, unused "E" script, hurriedly dusted off and blown-up for the occasion, but King does rise to that occasion rather well. Action, sentiment, a feeling for people and places, all are well done, and occasional moments (the death of a child, with a mother looking on outside the window) have real poignancy and remind us what a master King could be. Both the original Dionnes and the quintuplets' very aggressive parents have been thoroughly whitewashed and sentimentalised by the screenwriters, but on the other hand if Fox had come up with an "Ace in the Hole" type script, and a director like Wilder, they probably wouldn't have gotten the Dionnes on a contract either. It's an interesting filmic comment on a 30's nine-day wonder that was strong enough to build the film into a major boxoffice attraction including an opening at the Radio City Music Hall. Quite by the way, NY Times critic Frank Nugent who certainly should have known better, refers to the young romantic team of Michael Whalen and Jane Darwell as "two 10 minute intermediates".

"ARROWSMITH" (Sam Goldwyn-United Artists, 1931) Directed by John Ford  
Screenplay by Sidney Howard from the novel by Sinclair Lewis; Camera, Ray June; Music, Alfred Newman; Sets, Richard Day; 9 reels  

In 1931 "Arrowsmith" was a huge success, both critically and with the public. The reviews were unqualified raves, and the boxoffice response was enormous. Colman found himself riding the crest of a new and even greater wave of popularity, and Jim Ford after seven interesting but variable and uneven talkie features - indisputable in terms of the screen medium and maintained his re-established position thereafter. The Doctor- hero was very much the fashion in the thirties, and the novels of Lewis, Cronin and Lloyd Douglas hugely popular. This fashion of course has gone, and many of the films resulting from it seem superficial today, but if "Arrowsmith" no longer seems an important movie, it is still a good one, and an astonishingly polished and fluid one for so early a date in the evolution of sound films. Too, it has more the look of a Goldwyn film than a Ford film (their later collaboration, "The Hurricane" was likewise more dominated by Goldwyn than by Ford) though there are many typical images and players that have come to be associated with Ford. He even indulges one of his favorite, perverse tricks of casting players that he has gone on record as detesting (e.g., Lumsden Hare) in roles that make them look pompous and foolish! Colman is perhaps a shade too assured as Arrowsmith, but it's a smooth performance that is good to look at and listen too. Helen Hayes, great as she may have been on stage, is here again mannered and artificial, and the best performance comes from Richard Bennett. Although an implied Colman-Loy affair was ultra ambiguous and decorous even in pre-Code 1932, it was considered censurable when the film was reissued in the 40's, and virtually all of Loy's already limited footage was cut. Most extant prints of this rarely shown film are of the cut version, but we have been able to obtain the full, unedited version for our showing this evening. - Wm. K. Everson