THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 26: Program #10
December 17, 1976
Two films by William K. Howard

WHITE GOLD (Cecil B. deMille Productions-Pathe, 1927) Directed by Wm.K. Howard
Scenario by Garrett Fort and Tay Garnett from the play by W. Palmer Persons;
Titles by John Farrow and John Krafft; Camera, Lucien Andriot; Art Director,
Anton Grot; 6 reels
With Jetta Goudal, George Bancroft, Kenneth Thompson, George Nicholls, Clyde Cook
Plano Score arranged and played by Stuart Oderman

Like another major re-unveiling this month (Chaplin's "A Woman of Paris"), "White Gold" is a milestone classic rather than a permanent classic; that it has been improved on by later, similar films shouldn't in any way minimize its importance.
If it hasn't lost, some later films, among them Josef von Sternberg's "The Wind" and Murnau's "City Girl" might not have been made at all, and certainly wouldn't have been made as well.
A versatile, all-around director who tackled literally all genres but was at his best in slick, stylish, atmospheric crime thrillers, William K. Howard can fairly accurately and without intended slight be described as a "commercial" director. Despite off-beat content or style, most of his films were basically "safe" by Hollywood standards; they were designed to make money with a mass audience, and most of them did. There were two exceptions, both intensely personal films: "White Gold" and "Back Door to Heaven". Actually, "White Gold" had a fairly good chance of being a profitable if not a commercial film too, since its production values (and costs) were slight and it had a couple of good boxoffice names as insurance. The only obvious sign of a boxoffice "compromise" (possibly insisted on by deMille, though equally possibly Howard's own idea) is the inclusion of some not-very-funny comedy relief in the person of Clyde Cook.
He was an extremely useful individual, known as a comedian, yet also a good character actor, thus able to be absorbed into a dramatic film and provide comic punctuation alike by his presence or his absence. His financial for von Sternberg the following year in "Docks of New York", and was brought back by Howard to fill a like function in a not dissimilar 1942 film, "Klondike Fury".
But 1927-29 were good years for individualistic directors to make "personal" films. The handwriting was on the wall that the ultimate transition to sound was not far off. Silents were virtually written off, but were still a necessity until the wholesale transfer to sound was made. Nobody expected a silent to be a blockbuster financially, so directors were often left on their own, to turn out masterpieces or time-killers as their talents and inclinations warranted. He accepted it was his duty as a director of a "personal" film to experiment; for this reason, Howard was one of the few directors who had the nerve to make a film that was at least "commercial", were made in the 1927/28 years). Similarly with the early talkies: the mere presence of sound and dialogue, while the novelty lasted, was enough, and the directors of early talkies had the option of really experimenting (as Mamoulian, Vidor, Florey and others did) or sitting back to turn out canned theatre, confident that either approach would find a market.

"White Gold" (the title refers to wool) was one of the first of those films dealing with the juxtaposition of a city woman to a wild rural or frontier life, a theme that seemed to fascinate directors of the period (especially Europeans working in Hollywood) for the opportunity to contrast the psychological freedom of a closed-in city with the physical imprisonment of the wide open spaces. "White Gold", with only a couple of interior sets and the most suggestion of an exterior, was the most austere of all the films made in 1927 (if not a financial success) and caused one critic to write: "From the standpoint of production, scenario construction, directing and acting, "White Gold" compares most favorably with the best German films that have been brought to America. The production style is of the same order as "The Last Laugh". Deeper psychology is revealed in this film than in any other produced in America". One can certainly debate that final assessment, but it was not at all an unreasonable claim to make in 1927.

From that point on, Howard's reverence for the German cinema became even more marked, heightened no doubt by his friendship and affection (or, if not a friendship, at least "commercial", were made in the 1927/28 years). Similarly with the early talkies: the mere presence of sound and dialogue, while the novelty lasted, was enough, and the directors of early talkies had the option of really experimenting (as Mamoulian, Vidor, Florey and others did) or sitting back to turn out canned theatre, confident that either approach would find a market.

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It is hard to write about "White Gold" without over-selling it, or to refer to the extraordinary power of its climax without dealing also in content, and both would do a disservice to a still quite remarkable film. It is a solid film rather than one of flashy techniques - though there are moments of bravura editing and camerawork - and perhaps needs to be seen with low expectations, so that it can reveal its surprises gradually and in its own time. Howard, by the way, always wanted to remake this film as a talkie, and for a time a remake was planned through the Erich Pommer-Charles Laughton Mayflower company. If it had ever been made - "Sidewalks of London" (1928) and "Sidewalks of London" in the U.S.) as criteria, they would probably have done it extremely well. Now it is too late: film-making styles have changed (the recent remake of "Journey's End" was a mess, and shows no signs of a US release) and the morality which made the original ending so powerful and unexpected has undergone changes too, so that this ending in a contemporary film would hardly raise an eyebrow.
But in its original context of filmic techniques and social mores, it does still work, and very well.

"White Gold" is an extremely rare film, and until a few years ago was thought to be permanently lost. The print is not of the best quality, and occasionally due to shrinkage has a slight jiggie, but these are minor prices to pay for having such a film restored to us.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

BACK DOOR TO HEAVEN (Paramount, 1939) Written, produced and directed by William K. Howard; Associate Producer, Johnnie Walker; Screenplay by John Bright & Robert Tasker; Camera, Hal Mohr, Bill Kelly; Art Directors, Gordon Wiles and William Sautler; Editors, Hans Pomer and Jack Murray; Musical Direction, Erno Rapee; 8 reels


Far more of a personal film than "White Gold" — the basic plot comes from Howard's own experience and his sadness over a boyhood friend who finally ran with the Mike the pricker gang and was killed — "Back Door to Heaven" was intended both as a comeback picture for Howard and for the long-abandoned Paramount Studio in Astoria, Long Island. It succeeded on neither count. Coming after a three-picture sojourn in England, and the diminishing of his Hollywood reputation, Howard had hoped that it would re-establish him as a major Hollywood name. It didn't; between this film and his death in 1954, only six pictures remained to him — five very good and typically slick "B's" and one "A" — Cagney's "Johnny Come Lately". Howard's last film was "A Guy Could Change" in 1946.

There is obviously deep sincerity and considerable power in "Back Door to Heaven", and these qualities still show through — while Wallace Ford's performance remains one of his best. Other elements do tend to work against it, both artistically and commercially. For one thing, together with Fritz Lang's "You Only Live Once", it is about the most consistently down-beat and dramatically "loaded" of all the "social" melodramas of the 30's. And for a 1939 release it was behind the times, out of tune with what Hollywood was doing and audiences wanted. Secondly, filmed in the East — though given some location-shooting advantages — it faced many of the handicaps of New York-based production, not least in the lack of conviction in the studio-created "exterior". The budget was obviously not large, and Howard had to economise on the very things he did best — stylishly staged action sequences. On the other hand, a New York production enabled him to take advantage of many (then) unfamiliar NY stage actors. Van Heflin (taking over from the suddenly unavailable Kent Smith) was doing "The Philadelphia Story" on stage that year, and had apparently all but abandoned his thus-far negligible movie career. Whatever the film's shortcomings, they are not due to any interference with Howard during production and in fact Paramount got behind it with considerable publicity during shooting. Howard seems to have had complete freedom to bring in his favorite bit players from the coast and to use whatever production associates he chose. (The duality of credits for art direction, photography etc. was caused by the requirement that a NY union man be put on the payroll for the same job). Cameraman Hal Mohr was one of the best in the business, and art director Gordon Wiles had worked on "Sunrise" and won an Academy Award for Howard's "Transatlantic". Erno Rapee's score, making effective if ultimately excessive use of "Home Town" is very much in the tradition of scoring for the silents, and the mood it creates is often just right even if not subtle. Howard's long-time friend and his first star, Johnnie Walker, serves as both associate producer and a bit actor as the tough trustee in the prison segment. Howard himself has an effective acting bit as the prosecuting attorney. (And isn't that Barton MacLane's voice, dubbed in, during a prison scene?)

Despite his previous record, "Back Door to Heaven" seemed to stamp Howard as an old-fashioned director and prevented his return to the Hollywood big-time. It was also a "maverick" production long before films like John Cassavettes' "Shadows" were both fashionable and encouraged. It was released as little more than a programmer. It was reissued in the late 40's, double-billed with another Paramount East Coast social oddity, "One Third of a Nation". Sold to an independent distributor, both films were retitled and exploited via some of the most tasteless, sex-and-violence ridden ads of all time (even by today's standards) and received relatively little distribution.

William K. Everson