THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 27: Program #10
April 22 1977
A PASSPORT TO HELL (Fox, 1932) Directed by Frank Lloyd; scenario by Bradley King from the original story "Burnt Offering" by Harry Hervey; Camera, John Seitz; Art Director, William Darling; 75 minutes

Rarity is not of itself a virtue, but when a virtually "lost" film like "A Passport to Hell" can boast of stylish production values, an interesting if never outstanding director, and a particularly strong cast, it certainly deserves to be shown. If it's essentially a shallow kind of story, and a film that is unlikely to be remembered for long, no matter; while it's on screen it is likely to prove quite entertaining as an artifact. The intricate art means to look at the work of Elissa Landi and Alexander Kirkland, two players all too rarely seen these days. Harry Hervey, who had written von Sternberg's "Shanghai Express", released six months earlier, was clearly trying to use similar plot material to mould Elissa Landi into a Dietrich image for Fox. There's nothing wrong with the material, but Landi is too British and ladylike ever to convince as a lady with a scarlet past. Although her playing is both graceful and intelligent, she often fails to exploit the hidden innuendo in a line and even, one suspects, fails to recognise that it is there. What a wealth of meaning Dietrich's musical tones could have given a simple line like "I'm familiar with uniforms", a line that Landi delivers as though it means no more than it says. (Hollywood never knew quite how to handle Landi; it robbed her of the spontaneity if unpolished charm that she exhibited in her British silents, tried to change her into a femme fatale, and then settled her into a rut of cold patrician beauty roles, somewhere between Ann Harding and Madeleine Carroll, always treating her as a type and never as a unique individual). "A Passport to Hell" is however a good showcase for this phase of the Landi career; it's a handsomely mounted exotic costumed event -- even by Catalina Island, serving well as German East Africa -- and generally an enjoyable work in its own unsophisticated, larger-than-life way.

-- 10 minute Intermission --

CONDEMNED (Samuel Goldwyn-United Artists, 1929) Directed by Wesley Ruggles; Screenplay by Sidney Howard from the (1928) novel by Blair Miles; Dialogue Director, Dudley Digges; Set Design, William Cameron Menzies; Camera, George Barnes, Greg Toland; editor, Stuart Heisler. 85 mins app. (Also released in a silent version and a shorter sound version; later reissued under the title "Condemned to Devil's Island").


While Goldwyn never produced quite the number of enduring classics that he was prone to believe he had, at the same time he made a major contribution to the very early sound film which was overlooked then (with the possible exceptions of "Bulldog Drummond" and "Arrowsmith") and is often overlooked today. As a group, his films of that period did succeed in welding the great visual style of the silent era to the smoothly styled oral needs of the sound film. They were superbly designed and photographed, and Goldwyn seems already to have developed a keen interest in deep focus photography, and to allow Barnes and his assistant Toland to experiment in a style which later found full fruition in such Toland films as "Wuthering Heights", "The Long Voyage Home" and "Citizen Kane". Moreover, Goldwyn scripts -- often written by Sidney Howard or Ben Hecht -- tended to be far more literate than most in that early period. This of course didn't mean that they were all good films, but they did all have a modern and glossy look to them. "Condemned" is a bit slow, not least because its kind of story has been done so many times since, and nobody would claim that it was a major film; but it is a very modern looking film, quite able to stand direct comparison with films of three or four years later. (It is much newer looking for example, than Tay Garnett's quite similar "Prestige", a 1922 movie). And three or four years, in that particular transitional era, represents a tremendous amount of progress and development. It's the visuals that hold most of the attention, though Colman's performance is as polished and assured as always. It's always easy to take him for granted, but a per-the-nose-as-smooth-in this in 1929 shouldn't be taken for granted. The script seems to have softened the downbeat original story somewhat, in deference to Colman's romantic image, and the final scene, a happy plagiarism from the finale of "The Big Parade", could hardly be improved on as a supremely Hollywood fadeout to our 27th series! Incidentally, Dudley Digges makes the very most of his lecherous villainy. How much obscenity and leering innuendo he can cram into a single simple line to his wife: "Are you ready for bed?" -- and how much refined distaste Ann Harding is able to display in her underplayed reaction!

William K. Everson