THE VALIANT (Fox, 1929) Directed by William K. Howard; Scenario by John Hunter Booth and Tom Barry from the (1924) one-act play of the same title by Holworthy Hall and Robert Siddall. Cast: Marcs Andriot and Glen
Dobson also made in a Spanish version; 60 mins.
With Paul Muni (James Dyke); John Mack Brown (Robert Ward); Edith Yorke (Mrs.
Douglas); Marguerite Churchill; Richard Carlyle (Chaplain); Dewitt Jennings
(Warden); Clifford Dempsey (Police lieutenant); Henry Kolker (judge); and
Don Terry, George Pearce.

While "Christmas Holiday" is an authentic part of the film-noir cycle, that
stylistic and thematic group of films made primarily between 1941 and 1948,
though extending until the end of the 50's, "The Valiant" is one of scores of
films outside that period which do not fulfill all of the "requirements" of
noir, yet is a decided contender for membership in the club. It's a downbeat
film, admitted of primarily academic interest today, as both director
Howard's first talkie, and stage-player Muni's first film. Howard, a strong,
visual silent director, obviously had trouble adapting to the sound medium
— although not as much as certain other directors. Too, he made his mistakes early
and learned fast. His 1932 "The Trial of Vivian Ware" is a minor masterpiece
of style, and one of the fastest, slickest films ever made. That, and "The
Valiant" together form an instant lesson in the problems of sound and how they
were overcome; since both are melodramas, and both from the same studio, one
has many common points for comparison, and since both films together run a
little less than two hours, the history lesson they provide is succinct and to
the point. "The Valiant" starts out with much more mobility than most 1929
films, especially those shot in black and white, and in its whirling camera it's
made clear that it is going to be quite a picture. Then the very
necessity of its story forces it to concentrate more and more on restricted
settings and on a great deal of dialogue from Muni. Howard doesn't exactly
throw in the towel, but adjusts to the fact that it's a Muni film rather than a
Howard film, and at the mid-way point virtually turns the film over to Muni.
It's not the kind of role Muni did best, being an introverted rather than an
extroverted characterization, and moreover he was obviously unfamiliar with
film technique. But under the circumstances, Howard does well, and Muni does
better than might be expected. The slow pacing of the latter portion makes it
seem longer than its brief running time, but in its own way it is quite a
holding and moving story, and the rest of the cast is good — especially
Marguerite Churchill, quite one of the most under-rated actresses of that
period. Incidentally, the film was remade by Fox in the early 40's as a rather
long "3", under the title "The Man Who Wouldn't Talk", with Lloyd Nolan.
Rather ingeniously it expanded itself to include a long, melodramatic wartime
flashback that led to a happy ending.

— Ten Minute Intermission —

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY (Universal, 1944) Directed by Robert Siodmak; Produced by
Felix Jackson; Screenplay by Herman J. Mankiewicz from the story by Somerset
Maugham; Camera, Woody Bredell; Musical Score, Hans J. Salter; Songs: "Always"
by Irving Berlin; "Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year" by Frank Loesser;
"Someday My Prince Will Come" by Richard Whorf.

With Deanna Durbin (Jackie Lamont); Gene Kelly (Robert Mannette); Simon
Fenimore (Richard Whorf); Charles Mason (Dean Haren); Mrs Manette (Gale
Sondergaard); Valerie (Gladys George); Gerald Tyler (David Bruce).

Although a big monetary success, largely because of its curiosity value and the
publicity attendant on Deanna Durbin's first big dramatic role, both the film
and Deanna received the kind of reviews which suggested that the experiment
was not a successful one, and through no fault of her own, Durbin's career did
not regain her lost momentum. Possibly both reviewers and audiences were
thrown by the film in 1944; it was early in Siodmak's career, relatively early
in the film noir cycle, and much of it was probably misunderstood by the kind
of audiences that saw it. Today however, while it has its flaws — most of them
plot compromises imposed by the Production Code — it's a lot better,
and Durbin's performance is not only conscientious and thoughtful, but often
very poignant. Kelly seems too concerned with his own image to play the role
the way it should be played, Gladys George and Richard Whorf are saddled with
roles that are pure 40's stereotypes, and Dean Haren is a weak hero — throwing
most of the load back on to Durbin, though there's an interesting performance
from Gale Sondergaard, and Siodmak manages to make much of her relationship
with Kelly that the script is unable to deal with in specific terms. It's all
much watered-down and changed from the Maugham original, though not too point
of pith of catchery of distortion, and noir or not, it's a solid, craftsmanlike, glossy
Hollywood film all the way — with the most uninhibited climactic use of the
"Tristan and Isolde" music since the climax of Borsage's "A Farewell to Arms"
in 1932. Withheld for years because of the expiry of story rights, it's a
fascinating and satisfying film and a lot better than its reputation suggests.

— William K. Everson —