CORSAIR (Roland West Productions—United Artists, 1931) Produced and directed by Roland West; screenplay by West and Josephine Lovett from the novel by Walton Green; photographed by Ray June; Music, Alfred Newman; 7 rls With Chester Morris, Alison Lloyd (Thelma Todd), Fred Kohler, Ned Sparks, Frank Reicher, Mayo Methot, Frank Rice, Emmett Corrigan, Al Hill, Gay Seabrook, Addie McPhail, William Austin.

Roland West is truly one of the most forgotten of all forgotten directors, not least because he was a dilettante, working only when he wanted to. None of what he did make seems to have been lost. The film he made prior to "Corsair," however, a marvellous "old house" thriller, "The Bat Whispers," is an old New School favorite that we've run twice already and will doubtless get to again one day, and his silent horror-spoof "The Monster" with Lon Chaney will be shown here this fall. "Corsair" was his last film; just three years later he was a murder suspect in the ultimately never-explained death of his mistress, Thelma Todd. It's sad for his fans, although he cashed in on it by becoming a restauranteur and attracting the tourists! Like most of West's films, "Corsair" doesn't make it easy for the audience. The plot is far from straightforward, and the motives extremely involved. Many of the strongest plot elements are not present at all in the original novel, a routine tale of gangsterism and bootlegging written by a prohibition inspector. At a time when so many talkies were all talk, "Corsair" is all movie, with the pictorial elegance that had always distinguished West's work, smooth moving camera shots, excellent use of shadows, and some lovely night exteriors. (How many times did they take that lighthouse shot to get the seagull flying past at just the right time?) The unit was based on Catalina, but the sea and landscapes are cunningly angled to suggest the Eastern coastline from New York down to Florida. As part of the gangster cycle of the thirties, it had something in common with "The Finger Points" and other pre-Production Code movies, but it is more "acquaintanceship" than the movies - lack of "moral compensation" for both "good" and "bad" gangsters - even though their crimes have included murder. Chester Morris and Fred Kohler make an ideally matched pair of rival bootleggers, and Thelma Todd has seldom looked so coolly beautiful. Last but far from least, there's a lovely period score by Alfred Newman.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

MR. SKITCH (Fox, 1935) Directed by James Cruze; scenario by Ralph Spence and Sonya Levien from a story by Anne Cameron; Camera, John Seitz; 7 rls With Will Rogers, Zasu Pitts, Rochelle Hudson, Charles Starrett, Florence Desmond, Harry Green, Eugene Pallette, Charles Middleton.

Although Will Rogers was famous (or notorious) for being director-proof and for using his scripts only as a rough guide, translating dialogue and comedy business into his own particular idiom, he still needed good directors and solid scripts even if their presence was often hidden. It's no coincidence that his best films were the three he made with John Ford - one of the least known, The Lively Pate, when the formula was wearing thin, and when Ford were content to hand him routine scripts and average directors on the theory that he'd pull off a salvage operation and come up with an acceptable and pre-marketed commodity. In 1935 he did hold his own via sheer weight of personality in such dull films as "In Old Kentucky," "The County Chairman," "Doubting Thomas" and "Life Begins at 40" and made the most of it with a great comic vehicle for a funny man - and Ford's - best pictures. But the magic was evaporating; his tragic death renders futile any conjecture about what his career might have become, although a co-starring vehicle with Shirley Temple would seem to have been a certainty. In 1935 at any rate, he was still riding high, his pictures offering both variety and quality. "Mr. Skitch," directed by silent veteran James Cruze ("The Covered Wagon"), who also directed another well-liked Rogers talkie, "David Harum," is easily uneventful but often charming and very funny, due no little to the better-than-average comedy material given to Zasu Pitts and the balancing comedy of Florence Desmond, the brilliant British comedienne whose imitations of well-known personalities (including Zasu Pitts) are strikingly accurate yet free of malarice. If there is a complaint we can level against the film today it is the annoying use of back-projection and studio-work for a suggestion of a road trip. Probably a very automobile trip. But bear in mind that the NY-California auto vacation had seen a growing and very funny production of the auto and the improvement of roads. Silent films had been full of such jaunts as a basic plot-line, from 2-reel Sennett comedies like "Ruboked to Hollywood" to regular features like "Rubber Tires". By the early 30's, even though the depression had added dramatic weight to the purely comic plots, the plot was basically useful only as background motivation for Rogers, and the films of his last years, "A Gift," especially, contain no novelty value in location shooting, so for economical reasons it was kept to a reasonable minimum. If not absolutely top Rogers, "Mr. Skitch" is well up in the second echelon, and a good example of Rogers' skill in making accurate comments on the current social climate without in any way losing sight of the fact that he was an entertainer. "Mr. Skitch" is valuable both as a film holding up a mirror to a social problem (some seven years ahead of "The Grapes of Wrath") and as a thoroughly representative Rogers vehicle.

-- Wm.K.Eterson --