THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 29: Program 7
October 21, 1977

THE NINTH GUEST (Columbia, 1934) Directed by Roy William Neill

Sceneplay by Gwennett Weston from the play by Owen Davis based on the novel "The Man They Couldn't Hang" by Anthony Boucher and David Hennaut; Camera, Benjamin Kline; edited by Gene Milford; 67 minutes


"The Ninth Guest" seems to have been a kind of root-source for Columbia, who returned to its idea frequently. The last half of the 1939 Karloff vehicle "The Man They Couldn't Hang" is virtually the same story, while the much more recent "Murder By Death" seems close enough (except in spirit) to be a remake. One would hesitate to say that Agatha Christie borrowed - or ever had the need to - but her "Ten Little Indians" may well have been inspired by this (or its own sources); certainly the off-beat relationship between hero and heroine is remarkably the same in both works. In any event, it's an enjoyable murder mystery, plot and settings, and seems to have been deemed sufficiently chilling at the time for the British Board of Film Censors to label it a "horror" film and recommend against the attendance of children, although it was not until 1937 that they came out with an adults only "H" certificate to legally bar children under 16. No prices for guessing who the hidden killer is - even though Ralph Morgan isn't in the film. On the other hand, Samuel S. Hinds - perennial guest at such soirees, and occasionally the hidden killer himself - is on hand, so the less adept at these fun and games may still have a puzzle on their hands. In any case, the "how" is more important than the "who" this time. Directed by Roy William Neill ("The Black Room", "Dr. Syn", "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man" and almost all of the Rathbone Holmes series at Universal). Perhaps the greatest debt we all owe to Neill however is Hitchcock's "The Lady Vanishes". He had started on a version of that earlier, ran afoul of Yugoslavian officials (where some of the location work was being done) and the project was cancelled. Then, about a year later, Hitchcock picked it up and started from scratch. (In Neill's version, the Basil Radford-Naunton Wayne combination was played by Cecil Parker and Felix Aylmer).

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

ABDUL THE DAMNED (British International Pictures-Capitol Pictures, 1935)

U.S. release: Alliance Pictures; Directed by Karl Grune; produced by Max Schach; Screenplay by Ashley Dukes, Warren Chatham Strode and Roger Burford from a novel by Robert Neumann; Camera, Otto Kanturek; Art Direction, Clarence Elder, John Merc. 111 minutes.


While "The Ninth Guest" opened at the Roxy, poor Abdul had to settle for the Kiltos, and none too flattering reviews. However, the NY Times criticism - directionally, the film's least virtue - was fleeting: little churlish considering the heinous things that Hollywood was doing in the same area at the same time. In any event, it's a fascinating film - proof positive that the German influence that had so dominated British film in 1927-29 was still there with a vengeance. Fritz Kortner made a quartet of starring vehicles in Britain at this time, and why anybody should have thought him a boofix draw - especially in a film like this - is one of the many enigmas of British film-making in the thirties. This is an extraordinarily handsome film: despite occasional economics with back projection and miniatures, it is full of magnificent sets, photography, and superb trickery with glass shots and double-exposures. One scene of the two Kortners (he plays a dual role) looking into a mirror is an absolute stunner, and could never be done as well today. (Or perhaps it could; but it wouldn't be because of the time involved). It must have cost a fortune, and probably had a good deal to do with the demise of British International Pictures not too long afterwards.

Its story is of Abdul Hamid II, Sultan of Turkey from 1876 to 1909, the last of a line of tyrants, and notorious for never sleeping in the same room on two consecutive nights. (The film ends with his being deposed: for the record, he died in 1918, a prisoner in his palace until that time). In a sense, the film is Turkey's "The Birth of a Nation" - and coincidentally, when we previewed it about six months ago, that same night there were radio reports of new uprisings in Turkey along not dissimilar lines! It starts off on the Orient Express, and keeps going at a rapid rate. True, Kortner and Asther do rather play it along Karloff-Lugosi lines, revelling in their own machinations and lechery. Kortner's is a marvellous bravura performance, Kortner's skillful with every facial and body movement at his disposal. The dialogue is a joy, though its ripe theatricality is not always helped by an abundance of British accents below those Turkish fezzes. Hans Eisler's always interesting music and the incredible visuals make it a film of real artistic interest - a real - but it's that dialogue, and Kortner of course, that make it, as an entertainment, a Turkish delight of the first order.

The print is superb, fully complete, and the film itself hasn't been seen here in some 35 years. (Don't confuse it, by the way, with Veidt's British "King of the Damned" of the same year).

-- Wm. K. Eversen ---

(Program Ends: 11:17)