THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 52: Program #6

November 2, 1978

HOUSEWIFE (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by Alfred E. Green; Production Supervisor, Robert Lord; Screenplay by Manuel Seiff and Lillie Hayward from a story by Robert Lord and Lillie Hayward; Camera, William Rees; 69 minutes

Perhaps we should be honest and admit right away that if "Housewife" starred Lola Lane or Beverly Roberts (and implying no disrespect to those ladies) there would be a little point in reviving it. It's not that it's bad picture, just that it's a little routine one, slick mass produced support fodder, and no more. But with all of the missing, obscure or unavilable Bette Davis vehicles gradually being ticked off, this is one of the very few not to be revived - and from her point of view alone, it certainly is worth at least this one exposure. For it to be released immediately after her triumph in "Of Human Bondage" is a decided slap in the face; if Warners wanted to remind her that she was a "property" owned by them, they made their point; but on the other hand, it represents a deplorable lack of showmanship and business acumen. MGM, confronted with a similar situation, would most certainly have built up her part via the insertion of additional scenes, especially in the first half. However, it's a typically slick little Warner film, enjoyable if hardly inspiring, and it could have been a good deal better with some more enterprising writing for the male characters. George Brent is such a charmer that he really doesn't deserve slumming it with Bette Davis. And when Ann Dvorak is relegated to him, and then only John Halliday, going through his same role for the nth time, would be a much worthier prize. And pairing him off with Davis would have made for a pat ending, but a more satisfying one than the rather flat finale that now prevails. The film also makes interesting comment on Hollywood's basic distancing from the everyday facts of life - even though Warners were a little closer to them than MGM. However, it's all likely shade of the same depression, a housewife would be a lot more valuable $2 charge for a house-call from a plumber, or at least asking for a supply of notebooks, would be told to take a quarter from petty cash and buy them herself! And the ethics are as strange as the economics: an absolutely fraudulent scheme is presented as high initiative, and on another occasion drunkenness is actually recommended as being a necessity for drive and inspiration! Despite most of her footage being compressed into the second half, Bette Davis is a dumpy film as usual. As her routine, the only really notable it leaves is that, thanks to editing, we never get to hear the end of a razor joke from colored comics Rastus and Sambo!

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

MADAME DU BARRY (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by William Dieterle; Story and screenplay, Edward Chodorov; Camera, Sol Polito; Production Supervisor, Henry Blanke; Dance Creations, Albertina Rasch Dancers; 77 mins

Something of a "mislaid" if not actually a "lost" film, "Madame DuBarry" is very rarely shown, and then often minus the famous episode of DuBarry's appearance at court in a negligee. One reason for its disfavor may well be the Legion of Decency's "O" (Condemned) rating for "indecency". The rating was not rescinded, and TV stations often followed them to the letter, despite the laying off of many years and the changing of tastes and standards. Pola Negri and Norma Talmadge were never really able to make the DuBarry story really come alive, perhaps because it's quite a bit apart from its climax with the French Revolution; it's basically a rather dull and ponderous period piece of North Beach/Dolores Del Rio, beautiful as ever if not particularly sexy which doesn't make it come alive either. But what does is the fine and literate writing, the tasteful sets and decor, the unusually fine supporting performances, and most of all the touching playing by Reginald Owen. Once one has accepted his British accent, and discarded memories of his gloriously hammed-up villains in later movies, his performance dominates the whole film - in this superbly done death scene quite aside from all the thunder from Dolores' dramatic exit. Owen's worth noting are those of Osgood Perkins, Maynard Holmes (as the Dauphin, never as effective in anything else as he is here - and never again given such an opportunity) and Anita Louise as a very bitchy Marie Antoinette, quite a contrast to the wise and regal portrait by Norma Shearer. But most of the credit must go to Dieterle, and notwithstanding his more ambitious biographical studies with Muni and Robinson, this one is the one he shot quite the same thing he ever did in this genre. It's the same formula - historical and dramatic license is taken, but one never notes an anachronism, no line of dialogue strikes a wrong note, no performance provokes an unintended laugh. Even the elaborate dance of the nymphs seems properly austere,
and never makes one think that it is just a step removed from Busby Berkeley, as did the similar dance in the Norma Talmadge film. Van Dyke's "Marie Antoinette" was a more sumptuous production, but one frequently let down by its script. Occasionally theatrical - as history sometimes has a habit of being - this DuBarry seems to ring true, and the colorful meeting of Louis the 15th with Marie Antoinette - on a country road as opposed to the dramatic courtroom encounter in the MGM film - is a fine sequence. Even the occasional dry racial humors seem to belong more to the French milieu than to Hollywood of the 30's. Plot content is not markedly different or more eventful than before, but somehow Dieterle - and Chodorov - give it entirely new life. The sparse and dignified musical score makes tasteful use of the classics, with a stress on Mozart; Chuck and Mendelssohn, with an especially effective utilization of Beethoven's Sonata Pathétique and Bach's Air for the G String during the King's death scene.

"Madame DuBarry" is a welcome, though perhaps no longer so urgently needed, reminder that some of Dieterle's very best work came in the early 30's. And since both films came from the same company, and both opened at the Strand in New York within a two-month period, it is also a reminder of the methods and occasional bonuses of the old studio systems. "Housewife" may be just so much ground-out footage - but if that mass-production system hadn't existed, we'd never have gotten films like "Madame DuBarry" either.

William K. Everson

Next week: November 10: A SHIP COMES IN (1928), directed by William X. Howard, starring Rudolph Schildkraut, Louise Dresser (who received an Academy Award nomination for her performance), with Lucien Littlefield and Fritz Feld (Silent, musical score by Stuart Oderman) and WATERFRONT (1950) Directed by Michael Anderson, with Richard Burton, Robert Newton, Kathleen Harrison.