THE SPIRITED (Pathé, 1926) Directed by Tay Garnett; a Ralph Block production; Written by Hal Conkin and Tay Garnett from a story by Hal Conkin; Camera, Arthur Miller; Asst. Director, Robert Fellows; Musical Director, Josiah Euro; (Silent film, with music and sound effects) With: Alan Hale (Flash), Bud Roarke (Cleo); Clyde Cook (Juke); Fred Kohler (Red Moon); Fred Warren (The Barker); Jimmy Quin (The Rabbit); Kwipie Morgan (Butch); Billie Latimer (Bearded lady).

1926 represented the very peak of the silent period, with such directors as King Vidor, John Ford, Josef von Sternberg, Frank Borzage and Erich von Stroheim turning out some of their very finest work. Tonight's two features, while in some ways quite representative too, are from the other end of the spectrum, early features from new but soon-to-be-major directors, economical in the extreme, but showing just how much their talented directors could get out of limited budgets.

Tay Garnett, who started as a scenarist, and would go on to direct such talkies as "One Way Passage", "China Seas", "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Bataan", was here at the very beginning of his career. Like many late silent films, his plot is protracted and relatively slow to develop. Yet his film, full of colorful and melodramatic characters, and manages to look more expensive than it is. Arthur Miller, later one of Ford's top cameramen ("How Green Was My Valley") won Miller an Academy Award) keeps his photography sharp, mobile and often inventive, so that the film is visually interesting even when dramatically a little slow. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the film is its transitional sound track, with music, effects and crowd-dialogue but no direct dialogue as yet. The results are sometimes somewhat incongruous, and at least once a rollicking comic number is utilized in a tragic context, but academically of course it was a valuable record of the kind of early sound track that in many cases has not been preserved along with the picture itself.

— TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION —

PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING TWO FILMS ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART GEISEMAN

THEIR PURPLE MOMENT (Hal Roach-MGM, 1928) Directed by James Parrott; supervised by Leo McCarey; photographed by George Stevens; 20 mins.
With: Laurel & Hardy, Anita Garvin, Fay Holderness, Leo Willis, Tiny Sanford.

Although only an average Laurel & Hardy (not that that isn't a recommendation in itself), "Their Purple Moment" has been added to the program because it does fit in rather nicely as a 1928 film, and a demonstration of the early work of two more major talents - McCarey and Stevens - and too, because, not being a classic, it isn't as widely shown as other Laurel & Hardy silents. It offers a typical Laurel and Hardy situation, and though the pacing is a bit off, it does have some excellent gags. Stevens' photography of the malicious gossip hurrying through the streets is an exact duplicate, presumably an inside joke for parody purposes, of a more seriously intended shot in Griffith's "Way Down East" of 1920.

THE WAY OF THE STRONG (Columbia, 1928) Directed by Frank Capra; Produced by Harry Cohn; Scenario by Peter Milne from a story by William Conselman; Camera, Ben Reynolds; 61 mins.
With: Mitchell Lewis (Handsome Williams); Alice Day (Nora); Margaret Livingston (Marie); Theodore von Eltz (Dan); William Norton Bailey (Tiger Louis).

Note: The listing of a musical score in the credits refers to a new score that will be added to the film shortly.

Like so many of the gangster films that followed von Sternberg's "Underworld" in the late 20's, "The Way of the Strong" is quite sentimental, and somewhat of a reshaping of the old good-badmen Westerns, with the lead gangster and the reformation of the William S. Hart image, self-mocking and decent despite his occupation. These gangster films were never terribly realistic nor did they seek to impart a sense of outrage; criminal activity is mainly a matter of inter-gang warfare; the public are not shown as victims, and the police hardly involved until the climactic roundup. However Capra, fresh from comedy beginnings with Sennett and langdon, keeps his story on the move despite the sentimentalization. He has many comic touches, the story is short but to the point and there is a slam-bang action climax. It's probably a better film than most gangster films of the period, and it has the virtue that every one of the approximately twenty thousand dollars that made up the film's budget shows up on screen. Big scenes that aren't really necessary (like the visit to the Fun Fair) are just talked about — one popping balloon after the event takes care of the Fun Fair — the Police HQ is actually a side-door at Columbia — much use of shadows and intimate sets, the cinematography is interesting than showing faces and figures against meagre sets — and a simple shot of gangsters holding up their enemies in a panel shot showing just the guns. But where it really counts, in the big dramatic and action scenes, Capra doesn't stint, and within his budget plays these scenes for all they are worth. It's his 8th film altogether, and his fourth for Columbia. Theodore Von Eltz, probably chosen because he looks so much like Clive Brook, duplicates Brook's role in "Underworld". Mitchell Lewis isn't quite as good enough actor to pull off the full pathos of the Ben Chaney-Leah lead role, but he doesn't do badly. The titles by the way are translated from those in a Czech print, and the idiom is sometimes a little odd — e.g., the reference to hoodlums as "scoondrels" rather than (presumably) "rats".

— W.K.Bernson —