
THE LOCKED DOOR (United Artists-Joseph Schenck, 1929) Director: George Fitzmaurice, Screenplay by C.Gardner Sullivan and George Barborough from the play "The Sign on the Door" by Channing Pollock; Assistant Dramatic director, Earle Browne; Settings, William Cameron Menzies; Camera, Ray June; 74 mins.

With Barbara Stanwyck, Rod la Rocque, William Boyd, Betty Bronson, Zasu Pitts, George Bunny, Harry Stubbs, Harry Meitayer, Mack Swain, Furnell Pratt.

NY Premiere: Rialto Theatre, January 1930.

Both of tonight's films were premiered within the same period (less than a month apart) and both typify what our "Archive Night" programs are all about. They are perhaps more interesting for academic and study purposes than as entertainment, though both may well appeal to some - should it appeal to them entertaining on that score. Both also represent well above-average run-of-the-mill products of that awkward transition-to-sound year; a long way above the primitive standards of films like "Tanned Legs" or "Golden Dawn", but also a long way below the innovative levels of films like "Bulldog Drummond" and "Applause". Both are also virtually unseen films: The Locked Door has had exactly two (non-public) NY showings in the past 35 years; heaven knows when "The Mighty" was last shown.

"The Locked Door" is a remake of the silent "The Sign on the Door" (1921, directed by Herbert Brenon, with Norma Talmadge and Lew Cody). Little attempt is made to hide its stage origins; curtain climaxes are evenly spaced and easy to spot, and the entrances and exits are handled in a very theatrical fashion. Yet director Fitzmaurice ("Son of the Sheik," "Night of Love," Love Affair) managed to make a good deal. There is no need to talk just for its own sake, the camera keeps on the move to offset static plot qualities, silence is utilised a good deal, and the dialogue exchanges are broken down via cutting into alternating long, medium and close shots. After a lively opening (including a brief censure for a later release) the film does settle down to a rather placid pace with its familiar (in the 20's and 30's) mixture of obras and melodrama that was such a staple. A musical score, however, may have strengthened some of the plodding moments, although its absence sometimes helps too. The climax is really quite moving, and there the austerity is a plus factor. Music might have made it a more emotionally moving, but in its present unpolished form it does have a certain raw punch. The casting is both interesting and a little sad, with its teaming of new stage stars (Stanwyck and Boyd) on the way in - and with, as movie stars, and silent top-liners (Brown and La Rocque) on the way out. Stanwyck suffers with the former, and considering the problems of early talkies, and the fact that this was only her second film, does surprisingly well. (John Cromwell, director of tonight's co-feature, had wanted her desperately for his "Dance of Life," thus enabling her to get her screen career launched with a repeat of her stage triumph, but Paramount wouldn't go along). Betty Bronson, last week's "Peter Pan", is charming but less effective when forced to speak; like Bronson she somehow beneath screen and she never makes a impression (and returned to TV later on) her impact was minimal. William Boyd, of "What Price Glory?", shows here that he could be a fine actor when sober, which unfortunately was increasing infrequent - as witness a mid-30's serial, "The Lost City", where he is clearly drunk, unstable and even incoherent throughout.

Rod La Rocque, flashing his teeth and enunciating every word with even more deliberation than the rest of the cast, is a caricature of the 1920's star system and the purveyors of films who were defeated by talkies. Incidentally, the valet - George Bunny - was the brother of then deceased early screen comic John Bunny. A final footnote: the basic location (Boyd's house) is actually director Fitzmaurice's own house on San Angelo Drive in Beverly Hills. It has hardly changed a bit (Sally Forrest lives there now) and its spacious interiors and driveway leave the camera plenty of room to move around. Yet the art director is such that it looks like a Hollywood set of the period! Critics on the whole were very hard on the players, less kind to the film. Stanwyck herself has made acid comments about the film before dismissing it as quickly as possible.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

(Program ends tonight at 10:20, followed by discussion) ---

THE MIGHTY (Paramount, 1929) Directed by John Cromwell; Screenplay by William Slaven, McNutt story by Virginia Jones from a story by Robert E. Lee; Camera, Roy Arnold; Dramatic version of a silent released in silent form, with titles by Herman Markiewicz; NY Premiere, Rivoli Theatre, Dec. 1929; 73 mins.


This interesting mixture of war and gangster film is a reminder that some of the early sound directors, coming directly from the stage, were able to make more interesting movies than silent veterans. Despite flaws - awkward usage of silent footage, variable sound levels, weak sound effects - this is a well-made, well-paced little film, and the final showdown makes interesting use of both sound and theatrical lighting. Director Cromwell (whom you may remember came along a few seasons back to introduce his "A Village Tale") died only a few months ago, still in harness. The Times felt this film a big improvement on the previous Bancroft vehicle (von Sternberg's "Thunderbolt") but criticized continuity inconsistencies and Raymond Hatton's "well-cooked crook". Note the use of the studio itself in the final chase. Space running out, more comments in our introduction! --- W.A. Everson ---