THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 38: Program 2

October 3 1960

THE VOICE OF BUGLE ANN (MGM, 1936) Directed by Richard Thorpe; Produced by John W. Considine Jr., Screenplay by Harvey Gates and Samuel Hoffenstein from an original story by MacKinlay Kanin, Screenplay by Ernest Haller; 70 mins.


"The Voice of Bugle Ann" has been frustratingly elusive for years; always available, considered a minor classic of Americans (whether as a film or because of its literary source has never been too clear) and yet never revived. Our own revival tonight proves it to be neither a major rediscovery nor a major disappointment, but it does set the record straight, which is important in itself. It's easy to understand its reputation - and the fond memories carried by people who saw it on its initial release. For 1936, it was a commercial and unassuming film to have been made by a major company; today however it suffers a little through comparison with subsequent and superior films with related themes or moods, most specifically "The Biscuit Eater" (1940) and Jean Renoir's "Swamp Water" (of 1941). Two things work against "The Voice of Bugle Ann" today (though not to a harmful degree): one is the fact that most of the film is shot in the studio, and the stylised studio exteriors juxtaposed with the occasional real article, and an excess of night scenes to help in that welding, lend an artificial air; and secondly there is the lack of a really first-rate director. Richard Thorpe came from serials and "B" pictures, and became an invaluable large-scale action films like "Yankee". The closest he ever came to an "art" picture was "Night Must Fall", which owed its success more to its script and cast than to this rather pedestrian director. "The Voice of Bugle Ann" is directed quite efficiently, but it is never better than its script, and is on the whole treated as though it was just another programmer. The care and affection that went into the film with "Blithe Spirit" shows that direction can turn program fodder into something much more. "The Voice of Bugle Ann" needs no apology; it is intelligent, real, and effectively brief; but it could have been far more. Particularly is thrown a little off-balance too by its curious moral stance. One of the plot elements has Lionel Barrymore killing Dudley Digges virtually in cold blood because he thinks Digges has killed his dog something of which he is in fact innocent. Even though the audience is carefully prepared for this - Digges is shown to be his typically unlovable and tyrannical self, a role audiences were familiar with in the 30's - Barrymore's impassioned court-room plea, placing dogs on a human plateau, doesn't really work. (Even dog and cat lovers will have a hard time following some of Barrymore's logic!) Since this is Production Code time, Barrymore is sentenced and goes to gaol, but is very quickly pardoned amid general rejoicing and a total disregard for the fate of poor Dudley Digges, whose only crimes were those of being mean to his daughter and disliking dogs - both perfectly understandable traits under certain circumstances. All of this appears in the middle portions of the film, and tends to upset the equilibrium a bit, losing some sympathy for Barrymore, and causing the audience to expect some theme of retribution or explanation which never really materialises. It's pity that the film wasn't handed over to Clarence Brown as a bigger-budget special, though that too might have brought its own particular hazards - James Stewart in place of Eric Linden perhaps. Nevertheless, it's a pleasing, intriguing and generally satisfying film, if not quite the classic of Americans we had been hoping for.

— Ken Mikkle Information —

VOLTARE (Warner Brothers, 1933) Directed by John G. Adolfi; scenario by Paul Green, Maude Stone, Lawrence Dudley from the book by George Gibbs; Camera, Tony Gaudio; 75 mins.


It is eleven years since we played "Voltaire" at the New School; in the interim, we've played all the available Arliss films, and it has not shown up again elsewhere, so the time is ripe for both a revival and a reappraisal. We won't repeat all the notes we have issued over the past decade about Arliss's acting techniques and his forays into filmed theatre, except to say that now, with all the other Arliss films under our belts, this has two elements worth noting. One, although based on a book rather than a play, it is made theatrical by some of the stage adaptations, with a certain stilted quality in much of the dialogue and delivery - not helped by having Voltaire and the French king played by two much more resolute Englishmen! And Arliss himself seems to be making the role even larger-than-life than usual, jumping into it all with tremendous gusto (and perhaps a certain arrogance), losing some of his own technique and subtlety in the process. But no matter; it's grand fun, he still makes routine lines seem almost inspired, and his little speech denigrating Shakespeare is worth the admission price in itself. Another major bonus are the sets of art director Anton Grot, which are obviously worth a fairly tight budget, manages to suggest opulence when he can, enough to recreate it, and outdoes himself on decor and properties - such as Voltaire's delightfully scratching quill pen. Moreover, Grot's great idea of courting Voltaire's affection by bringing him, using part of that magnificent miniature rooftop pullback from "Swengall", painting in reverse so that it looks like a different shot! The film's elegance, and Arliss' bag of tricks (such as yanking off one wig to reveal another beneath) make it a constant fascination, even though we know it's not top-level Arliss.

— William K. Everson —

Program ends approx. 10:15 followed by discussion session.

Next week: Lastair Slim program: THE GREEN MAN and SCHOOLS FOR SOUNDERS.