Considering her obvious talent and appeal, Ginger Rogers' career, though prolific (some 20 films in the four years leading up to "Flying Down to Rio") was a long time getting off the ground, and one wonders whether she was perhaps being badly advised by her agent into taking anything and everything that came along in order to get maximum exposure. "Hat Check Girl" was her 11th film, and despite having played leads in many of the earlier ones, she has the secondary feminine role. It's one of those films (and there were many of them in the 20's) where one is never quite sure if it's the big film that went wrong, or if "Th" that is much better than it has a right to be.

The fairly expensive-looking trappings are misleading, since the nightclub sets appear to be refurbished from the previous year's "Transatlantic", with the same art director (Gordon Willis) to transform them from oceanic to terra firma locales, and some extremely glossy camerawork from Glen MacWilliams to help them along. The film gets off to a good start with lots of legs, gingerly and snappy dialogue. The establishing shot, using a love song juxtaposed with a horse's rear end, appears to be a parody of Lubitsch's opening shot from "Trouble in Paradise". Sally Eilers and Ginger Rogers, though their roles could profitably have been reversed (actively, or at least to forget today that Eilers was very popular at the time of making it, and with Rogers getting some of the big billing), are dancing together in the subway, she remarks "I must be the first girl in the world that everybody's feeling!"

Perhaps coincidentally, but more likely not, the film seems to decline in vitality in direct proportion to Ginger Rogers' gradual withdrawal from the film. It's a handsome film, but somehow it gets to be like an overgrown exploitation movie, with a little more actually happening than usual, but a certain amount of padding too. The Long Central Park interlude seems quite unnecessary, whereas the dramatic material of the climax is cut off and resolved almost before it gets going. With the pace, imaginative camerawork and the score (one of that opening reel one expects to materialize - but even as it most enjoyably, and it is always good to see Sally Eilers (perhaps a little on the plump side here) in such a good and for her typical role. Incidentally, as far as is known, no 35mm material exists on this film today, and this 16mm print may literally be all that is left.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

STAR OF MIDNIGHT (Rko Radio, 1935) Directed by Stephen Roberts; produced by Pandro S. Berman; screenplay by Howard Green, Anthony Veiller and Edward Kaufman, from a novel by Arthur Somers Roche; cameras, J. Roy Hunt, music, Max Steiner; 90 minutes.


For some reason "Star of Midnight" has been missing from the NY scene for a long time, never making it to the revival houses and being shunned by television too. We have had many requests to show it, and quite frankly the only reason we haven't shown it long ago is that I found it a singularly disappointing picture (especially given its considerable reputation) and I was frankly hoping that it would show up elsewhere. But hasn't... Since I have been singularly dictatorial in foisting my own eclectic favorites on to New School audiences, it seemed rather unfair not to show a film that that audience had requested. (Not only can I be wrong in evaluating a film of course, but even if not, disappointing films often have a way of coming to life with an audience).

"Star of Midnight", which premiered at the Radio City Music Hall, was one of many spin-offs from "The Thin Man", the more obviously so because of the William Powell presence. It was extremely well-liked at the time, and developed something of an underground reputation because of its director, the versatile Stephen Roberts ("The Man Who Played Drake", "If I Had A Million") and whose promising career was interrupted by his death, his last picture, a year later, being the second of the William Powell "Thin Man" copias, "The Ex-Mrs. Bradford". (It was remarkably similar to "Star of Midnight", though livelier, and Jean Arthur took over from Ginger Rogers).

The problems with "Star of Midnight" (an exceptionally clever pun title by the way) are three-fold. Firstly, as a mystery it's just too urban. The sophistication is delightful, but the identity of the killer is never once in doubt. Yet the motivation for the crime is so complex that it never does get wholly sorted out; given the lack of compensating action or melodrama, this leaves a certain aura of dissatisfication. Secondly, though elegant, the film is somewhat "flat". Once realism is forgotten through, when a bus-travel montage is suddenly accompanied by music, that Max Steiner hasn't been awake and earning his money till that point. A lively and punctual score would have worked wonders for the film. And thirdly, there is a curious lack of chemistry between Ginger Rogers and William Powell; they should work ideally as a team, and individually they are fine. But somehow as a team they don't work well, and much of their repartee is just dissipated. (And the unsuitable intercuts of Gene Lockhart are enough to make any glistening possibly suspicious butler, are so transparent as to be irritating too). However, students of alcoholism on screen can have a field-day here. In the late 20's, characters on screen usually turned their backs to the camera to drink in the early thirties, at the tail end of prohibition, it's reinitiated with a drinking was flouted as an exciting taboo here, post-prohibition, it's reintroduced...