THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 43: PROGRAM #5

July 14, 1982

1932: Two courtroom crime melodramas

THE MOUTHPIECE (Warner Brothers, 1932) Directed by James Flood and Elliot Nugent
Screenplay by Earl Baldwin and Joseph Jackson, from a story by Frank Collins
Camera, Barney McGill; 80 mins.


Openly plagiarized from Gene Fowler's "The Great Mouthpiece" (although Fowler's screenplay was never rewarded by Zanuck with a lucrative position on the payroll), "The Mouthpiece" is one of several movies based on the career of Bill Fallon, and played by John Barrymore in "State's Attorney". It has also been officially remade twice: once with George Brent in the 40's as "The Man Who Talked Too Much", and with Edward G. Robinson in the 50's as "Illegal". The American courtroom film is a genre apart; the British films in "The Winslow Boy" (for example) are usually concerned with the principles of justice, whereas the American counterpart tends to concentrate on the mechanics of justice. In this respect, and especially for a 1932 Warner film, "The Mouthpiece" is surprisingly restrained. The courtroom fireworks are less exploited than one would expect, and the film is longer and more polished than the average film of its type and period. It is thus probably less of a "fun" film than you're expecting, but a correspondingly much better one. Warren William, less dynamic than Barrymore perhaps, gives his usual flawless performance and leading lady Sidney Fox is rather better than usual, though not quite up to her one really big dramatic scene. Aline Mahon merely repeats her "Five Star Final" role and performance, Paulette Goddard is in brief as a gangster's moll, and that excellent actor-director Ralph Ince is once more in fine fettle as the head of an imposing collection of gangsters, all of whom, in the tradition of the 30's, are wholly Italian. Quite incidentally, Harry Langdon made a very funny 2-reel serial entitled "Counsel on de Fence". And finally, rather typical of so many films of the early and mid-30's (other examples: "Air Mail", "John Beade's Woman", "Beloved Enemy") the climax tries to have it both ways, and let the audience decide whether the hero lives or dies. By all logic he should die, yet the ending is ambiguous enough so that those who insist on a happy ending can interpret it optimistically.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

THE TRIAL OF VIVIENNE WARE (Fox, 1932) Directed by William K. Howard.
Screenplay by Philip Klein and Barry Conners from a story by Kenneth Ellis.
Camera: Ernest Palmer; 56 mins.


William K. Howard, one of the most great visual stylists of the silents, made a rather uncertain debut as a talkie director with 1929's "The Valiant", an interesting film hampered by being essentially a talkie-fest for Paul Muni's screen debut. But some three years later (and with some good films in between) Howard here shows himself to be a totally mature director, crammed into five reels -- and yet few films have been so soothingly so visual virtuosity. It is almost certainly the fastest film ever made -- no mean achievement in that it is essentially a courtroom drama, and the action and pace has to be introduced artificially. Dietrich made perhaps the most intellectually conceived runner-up for "fastest film" in his "Fog Over Frisco" of 1934, and William Powell rates a nod for the way his virtuoso performance brought speed and pace to "High Pressure", but neither of them can quite equal "The Trial of Vivienne Ware". With that cast and plot it must have been planned as a 75 minute film, but Howard zips it through so fast with swish-pans, overlapping dialogue, eccentric time and locale changes, abnormally rapid dialogue delivery and a constantly mobile camera, that it's all over in less than an hour. Of course, something has to give -- and that something is logic and sanity. No courtroom procedure has ever been so frenzied or absurd, or more likely to get everyone disbarred -- to say nothing of the security -- which allows witnesses to be shot down on the witness stand. But forget logic; just enjoy the zaniness and excitement of it all, try to catch all the throw-away wisecracks, enjoy the art-deco sets, and note the occasional scenes where shooting went at such a pace that odd lines of dialogue were forgotten, and had to be dubbed in later by players other than the ones speaking them. It's a classic -- of sorts -- and certainly a most exhilarating hour.

Program ends approx. 10:10

--- William K. Everson ---

Note: I will be away for the last two shows, which will thus start promptly at 7:30 without introductions. The last program, the Howard Spring double-bill, is in any case an exceptionally long program which would have allowed for an intro or discussion anyway. FULL SCHEDULES available at the last show; or by sending me an envelope, addressed and hopefully stamped, c/o New School.

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