An Evening of Maladrama: 1929-1939

A DANGEROUS WOMAN (Paramount, 1929) Directed by Rowland V. Lee; Assoc. Producer, Louis B. Lighton; Art director, Gerald Grove; Adapted by John Farrar, with additional dialogue by Edward Paramore Jr., from the story "A Woman Who Needed Killing" by Margery Lawrence in Cosmopolitan Magazine; Camera, Harry Fischbeck; Art Direction, Hans Dreier; 72 mins.

With Clive Brook (Frank Gregory); Olga Baclanova (Tania); Neil Hamilton (Bobby Gregory); Clyde Cook (Tubbs); Leslie Fenton (Peter Allerton); Snitz Edwards (Chief-maker).

Although this is (hopefully) an entertaining film series, it is also periodically a showcase for films which are interesting footnotes to film history, films which may possibly be entertaining or amusing for the wrong reasons, but which have interesting things to display about the period in which they were made — and which are unlikely to get any other exposure. "A Dangerous Woman" certainly falls into this category. It's a historical film, though an entertaining one in which one can see such extremes that they become fascinating in themselves. While it is technically available for television, its incredible racist stance is probably keeping it off even the 3 a.m. slots.

Rowland V. Lee was an interesting silent director (we hope to show his Pala Negri vehicle "Barbed Wire" in the Fall) and later on a colorful sound director, but he was never particularly inspired and in 1929 like so many run-of-the-mill directors was doing his best, with dialogue-coach assistants, to muddle through whatever was given him. Actually, although a static film, it is also a fairly short one, and its content is so wild that it's never boring — whereas many early talkies frankly were. Secondly, it's a wonderful example of the kind of film that got made in that transition-to-sound period that wouldn't have been made in any other period. Hollywood, with its massive studio system, had to turn out up to 60 films a year per studio. Stars, directors and technicians had to be kept busy, and the studios then often owned their own theatres, which they had to keep supplied with product. France, with no studio system whatsoever, could afford to take its time easing into talkies, treating each film as an individual case. Britain, with a limited studiosystem, and relying heavily on Hollywood, was likewise under less pressure. But Hollywood, not having had time to train writers in the whole new art of screen-writing for talkies, had to fall back on remakes of silent material, and newly acquired plays, novels and short stories, where the structure and the dialogue was already there and where (presumably) all one had to do was get a few sets and a few actors and translate it all from printed page to celluloid. Another possibly dubious but still historically interesting aspect of all this is that Hollywood thus preserved for us many unpublished or obscure stories, and unproduced plays, that we might otherwise have never heard of. Margery Lawrence, who wrote this particular story, also wrote that classic of absurd British romantic/Gothic, "Madonna of the Seven Moons", so this is an interesting stepping stone in her career too, and certainly shows that she knew where she was going!

Not least of the film's delights is its incredible racist stance, interesting because it couldn't have been accepted in 1929 if racial prejudices generally were not much more virulent at that time. (Prejudice is perhaps too strong a word; but the "attitudes" were reflected in plays, novels, films, newspapers and in vaudeville skits). It is certainly too absurd to be taken seriously enough to cause offense, and even such British colonialist films as "Sanders of the River" never approached the two scenes herein in which the native chief asks the wise white woman for permission to kill his unfaithful wife. The considered opinion is no, just beat her up - and come back for further discussion. Even more delightful is the scene in which Neil Hamilton comes down to dinner in a very second-story condition, quite unshaven, and gets a long lecture from brother Clive Brook to the effect that it is only by shaving and dressing for dinner every day that the British can keep thousands of natives in subjection! (At least this explains why I am always clean-shaven for my introductions). Africa itself takes quite a beating; every time it is referred to in the dialogue it is in the most derogatory of terms. The wonderful Olga Baclanova also gets her fair share of classic dialogue, at one point telling us that she will sing a song but since it is in Russian we will not understand it - quite an understatement: since much of her thick accent, even with English dialogue, is imperceptible anyway!

"A Dangerous Woman" obviously took itself quite seriously in 1929, and therein lies much of its charm. I don't invite disrespect or levity for it, but since it is bound to be there, there is no harm in enjoying it. Clearly influenced by the old "White Cargo" with its steamy-sex-in-the-jungle atmosphere, "A Dangerous Woman" is exactly that kind of lurid and unrestrained melodrama. And there is no reason why such material shouldn't make suitable film material. After all, this plot is basically no more wild than that of "Blonde Venus" - but Baclanova isn't Dietrich, and Lee isn't Sternberg. Sternberg certainly wouldn't let his characters talk endlessly about the heat and the damp - but not show any signs of perspiration on their clothes!

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Incidentally Paramount put out a wonderful coming attractions trailer for the film in 1929. Clive Brook, chatting as informally as his stiff persona would allow, revealed to audiences that a few months earlier he had found this wonderful story, "A Woman Who Needed Killing", and was so impressed with its overwhelming quality that he brought it to Paramount's attention - only to find to his delight that the equally acute Paramount had discovered it too, and in addition had bought it; specially as a vehicle for him. Nobody dreamed then that these two pictures were destined for a quick six-month play-off and then oblivion, would be back half-a-century later to embarrass them. Though hopefully tonight the atmosphere will be one of disbelief and perverse enjoyment rather than embarrassment.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

BLACKMAIL (MGM, 1939) Directed by H.C. Potter; Produced by John Considine jr. Screenplay by David Herr and William Ludvig from a story by Andre Boum and Dorothy Yost; Camera, Clyde de Vinna; Associate, Aiba Tavory; 2nd unit director, Charles Dorian; Music, Edward Ward and David Snell; 81 mins. With: Edward G. Robinson (John Ingram); Ruth Hussey (Helen Ingram); Gene Lockhart (William Ramey); Bob Watson (Hank Ingram); Guinn Williams (Meese McCarthy); John Wray (Diggis); Arthur Hohl (Rawlins); Esther Dale (Sara); Charles Middleton and Trevor Bardette (deputies); and Joseph Cotten, Frank Darie, Cyril Ring, Wade Boteler, Cy Kendall, Victor Kilian, Ed Brady, Harry Strang, Gil Perkins, Mitchell Lewis, Willie Best, Robert Middlemass, Edy Chase, Virginia Dwyer, Joan Cooper, Lee Phelps, Hal Price, Bob Reeves, Ethan Laidlaw, Barbara Bedford.

The trio of films that Robinson made for MGM ("The Last Gangster", "Blackmail" and "Wholly Partners", 1937-41) while still a major star at Warner Brothers are curious hybrids indeed. All are typical Robinson vehicles, they imitate the Warner formula and plot content carefully, and yet they are truly MGM products too - glossy, over-produced, and rather too relaxed in tempo. "Blackmail", partly because of its cast, mainly because its plot has so many echoes of "I Am a Fugitive From A Chain Gang", has the most kinship to the Warner films. In some ways, it is even a little more honest than "Chain Gang". One of the weaknesses of that film was that Muni was the stock "framed" hero, and thus really outside of the group of humanity on whose behalf the film was speaking out. In other ways of course, "Blackmail" is less honest. There was a raw, gutty quality to the Warner films, with a minimum of studio interference. Compare Muni's escape from the chain gang with Robinson's, all tricked up with arty angles and much back projection. Furthermore, Warners always seemed much more in touch with reality and the way people actually lived. Robinson here is appalled that his wife has to take a cheap house "on the other side of the tracks" - but the house, when we see it, is an art director's dream, and if not exactly plush, is still a more comfortable home than most Americans could dream of owning in 1939. But these things apart, it's still an enjoyable melodrama, held together less by thrills than by its good performances, some excellent 2nd unit work involving oil-well fires, and the always fine photography of Clyde De Vinna ("White Shadows in the South Seas"). Bob Watson's crying jags are, as always, a bit hard to take, but Gene Lockhart's slinky villainy - another wonderful job of cringing coming mid-way between "Algiers" and "Hangmen Also Die" - more than makes up for it. Although not credited to him, the montages have the look of being Slavko Verapkich work, and the versatile H.C.Potter - like William Seiter, a good all-around man who did his best work in comedy - keeps things moving briskly. As always in films of the 30's, there is full integration in the chain-gang scenes if nowhere else!

William K. Everson

Program finishes at 10.21, followed by discussion session.

For your information, the jazz concerts that precede our sessions are this semester scheduled for the following dates:

Feb.17 (next week); March 25; April 27.

In all cases the concerts are scheduled to finish at 7.30, so there will probably be a slight delay as the auditorium is cleared. None of the programs involved are particularly lengthy, so the delay will be of minimum inconvenience. However, knowing the crush the developments in the lobby, you may wish, for your own comfort, to arrive a little later than usual.