THE NIGHT CLUB LADY (Columbia, 1932) Directed by Irving Cummings
Screenplay by Robert Riskin from the novel by Anthony Abbot (Fulton Oursler);
Camerat Ted Tetzlaff; 70 mins.
With: Adolphe Menjou (Thatcher Colt); Mayo Methot (Lola Carewe); Skeets Gallagher (Tenny); Ruthela Stevens (Kelly); Blanche Frederici (Mrs Carewe); Gerald Fielding (Gurnett); Nat Pendleton (Mike); Albert Conti (Vincent); Greta Granstedt (Eunice) Ed Brady (Bill); and all the thoroughbreds of Humphrey Voge (male); Miles Welch (Dr. Baldwin); William von Brincken (Dr. Lengle); Tetsu Shimada (Mura); and Olaf Hyttén Frank Darjen.

For the past few months, the major mystery and suspense associated with "The Night Club Lady" was whether it would be as good as one hoped. A very recent rediscovery, we booked it - we might almost say "grabbed it" - right unseen, sometimes a risky procedure with early Columbia's, and one we rarely indulge in. Happily the gamble paid off: not only is it a really good mystery in a literary sense, but it is a much better and faster-paced movie than one expects from the usually lack-lustre director, Irving Cummings. One minor surprise is that, handsome and well-mounted though the film is, Columbia treats its detective hero Thatcher Colt rather casually, making little attempt to set the stage for him or build up advance interest, though at the same time trying hard not to disappoint fans of the novels. (There are some changes from the novel's format, especially in the broad comedy relief supplied by Skeets Gallagher, but Colt himself is translated rather faithfully). Perhaps because of the plethora of sleuths on the screen at the time, Columbia were reluctant to commit themselves - and of course repeated the process with a brace of Nero Wolfe mysteries, before settling down much later to formularised "B" series mysteries with Ellery Queen, The Lone Wolf and Boston Blackie. There was to be one more Thatcher Colt from Menjou and Cummings in 1938, and then the Colt would disappear from the screen until reincarnated by Sidney Blackmer in a well-above-average FRC, "The Panther's Claw", in the early 40's.

Cinematographer Tetzlaff, to become a good director of thrillers himself later on, keeps the camerawork unusually mobile and classy, and helps to keep the film literally on the move all the time. Although you'll probably guess the murderer, the film does play fair in this respect, scattering suspicion pretty evenly, and not even bothered to make the stock Sinister Oriental even a real suspect, and

"Ten Minute Intermission -"

THE MILKY WAY (Paramount, 1936) Produced by E. Lloyd Sheldon; Directed by Leo
McCary; Screenplay by Grover Jones, Frank Butler and Richard
Connell from the play by Lynn Root and Harry Clark; Camera, Al
Gillis; 83 mins.

With Harold Lloyd (Burleigh Sullivan); Adolphe Menjou (Gabby Sloan); Veree
Teasdale (Ann Westley); Helen Mack (Mae Sullivan); Dorothy Wilson (Folly Pringle);
William Gargan (Speed McFarland); George Barbier (Wilbur Austin); Lionel Stander
(Genero); David Landau (John Jones); J. O. Howard (Lennox); Marjorie Rambeau (Mrs Winthrop Lompe);
Bonita (Landlady); Bull Anderson (Obolitze); Jim Marples (O'Rourke); and Milburn
Stone, Henry Roquemore, Arthur Byron, Eddie Dunn, Phil Tead, Eddie Fetherstone;
Antrim Short, Vic Potel, Lloyd Ingraham, Murray Alper, Harry Myers, Charles K.
French, Anthony Quinn, Bruce Mitchell.

Although a big hit in its day, "The Milky Way" began to disappear by the end of the
30's, and vanished officially in 1946 when Sam Goldwyn remade it as "The Kid
from Brooklyn" with Danny Kaye. So for the nearly 40 years since then, it has been a
"lost" film, viewable only rarely at one or two archives throughout the world.

Some of those who did see it archivally - as I did in Brussels some 12 years ago -
tended to under-rate it, since all Lloyd films are timed for, and need the input of,
a large audience. Seen alone in an empty screening room, they just don't work as well as they should.

"The Milky Way" is almost certainly the all-around best talkie that Lloyd ever
made, not least because for once it was not designed for him (being based on a
play that starred Hugh O'Connell) and because for once Lloyd is not the whole
show. Indeed, one might almost say that "for once" and stress that this was
really the first time that both of these elements were present in a Lloyd film.

Tonight's program is something of an unofficial Adolphe Menjou tribute too, since
he is in both films, in widely differing roles, and actually with wife Veree
Teasdale grabs up most of the big laughs in "The Milky Way". They have great
lines to work with of course, but their timing is impeccable too. (Walker Abel
got nowhere near the same laughs with that role in the Kaye remake). "The Milky
Way" is much more an example of teamwork both in front of and behind the camera
than was the case with most Lloyd vehicles, and Lloyd himself benefits from it
since the attention is taken away from his character whenever it shows signs of
becoming annoying or too boisterous. McCoy is certainly one of the best comedy
directors that Lloyd ever worked with, and the supporting cast is a joy to watch.

OVER-
An early drunk scene with Garkan and Stander (who repeated his role in the remake) doesn’t play too well and suggests possibly too great a stress on dialogue, but it’s only a brief loss of stride, and the film thereafter flows smoothly. If it lacks the traditional bang-up Lloyd climax, then the characterisations and the snappy lines more than make up for it. And though not given too much to do, the graceful and intelligent Dorothy Wilson — who should have gone far further than she did — is another major asset.

Interestingly, "The Milky Way" was released in the same year as Chaplin's "Modern Times." Just as the latter seemed to consolidate Chaplin’s contention that he didn’t need dialogue, so did "The Milky Way" seem to signal Lloyd’s finally and successfully having come to terms with it. Critical reaction was universally favorable. The production problems that the film had undergone (McCary, Menjou and Teasdale had all been sick, delaying production and sending up costs) certainly didn’t show on-screen. Unfortunately, and unaccountably, Lloyd’s next film — "Professor Beware" — was a sad letdown, and one of the weakest of all his features. Never willing to countenance failure, and not needing the money, Lloyd thereupon called it quits — returning only to produce a film in the early 40’s, and to star in the Preston Sturges "The Sin of Harold Diddlebock" in 1947.

One mildly offbeat (and possibly unsatisfactory) element of "The Milky Way" is that the Lloyd character comes out on top without really deserving to, and in fact has followed the traditional route of getting rather big-headed — without the deflation and "coming down to earth" that audiences then expected. Whether this was an oversight — Lloyd was usually careful about not missing bets and giving the audience just what it expected — or whether it was a deliberate attempt to be a little different, is something we can only conjecture about today. Anyway, it’s good to have "The Milky Way" back in circulation again — and in a good print.

—— William K. Everson

Program ends at 10:25, to be followed by
Question and discussion session.

POST SCRIPT
I might have mentioned that when NIGHT CLUB LADY opened at the Paramount, the
stage show with it was headed by Norma Talmadge, Burns and Allen, George Jessell
and Donald Novis.

Also, as usual, I will be away for most of the series, so programs will start
promptly at 7:30 without introductions. Full notes will be on hand for each
screening of course, and I will be back for the final session. Our Fall series
is a very special one, as befits our 50th series, and the schedule will be
available on that July 25th screening. If anybody who can’t be at that
evening would like a copy of the schedule mailed to them, drop me a postcard
at the New School to reach me not later than July 25 and it will be mailed to
you. The Fall series starts slightly earlier than usual, on Sept. 21st.

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