SILENT WITNESS (Fox, 1932) Directed by Marcel Varmel, assisted by H.L. Hough
Scenario by Douglas Doty from the play by Jack De Leon and Jack Celestin;
Camera, Joseph August. 70 mins.
With Lionel Atwill (Sir Austin Howard); Greta Nissen (Nora Selmer); Weldon Heyburn (Carl Blake); Helen Mack (Sylvia Pierce); Bramwell Fletcher (Anthony Howard); Mary Forbes (Lady Howard); Montague Shaw (Inspector Robbins); Wyndham Standing (Sir John Lawson); Alan Mowbray (Arthur Drinton, K.O.); Herbert Mundin (Henry Hammer); Billy Bevan (Horace Ward); Lowden Adams (Justice Bond); Eumden Hare (Col. Grayson); Eric Wilton (Clerk of the Court).

Lionel Atwill's sound-feature debut was a tightened-up version of the play in which he had appeared so successfully on the Broadway stage in 1931. (Presumably in the London version actor/writer/impressario assigned himself the comedy role here taken by Herbert Mundin, just as he allocated the cockney comedy role to himself in Hitchcock's "Number 17"). Understandably, not too much effort has been made to conceal the theatrical origin. To the contrary, every means is exerted to turn it into an absolute tour de force for Atwill, providing him with sustained scenes of menace, near-breakdown and of course sardonic humor. It's still a theatrical performance, but a most impressive one. For the rest, it's a good if talkative murder mystery with enough ramifications to make one discard the predictable solution well before one realises that one was right in the first place. The supporting cast is an interesting one, with Greta Nissen turning on the heat once again, and Weldon Heyburn first up at bat in a long line of imitation Gables, though most of them (Kent Taylor, Don Castle, George Montgomery etc.) waited until Gable's masculinity had been supplemented by sophistication and poise. Heyburn never a very interesting actor, and soon to disappear into "B" movies - is so groomed, tailored and photographed (even to the protruding ears that at times bear a surprising if superficial resemblance to the early, pre-moustache Gable.

Oddly enough, when I screened the film in London last Christmas, the audience was surprised to find that it was not a British film, an assumption they jumped to fairly early in the proceedings, and helped along no doubt by the realistic quality of the Old Bailey scenes. When the film opened at the Roxy, the stage show was headed by El Brendel .... a combination that fortunately we can't duplicate tonight.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

LAUGHTER (Paramount, 1930) Directed by H. Dabbadie D'Arrast; Story by D'Arrast and Douglas Doty, with additional dialogue by Donald Ogden Stewart;
With Nancy Carroll, George Folsey; 75 mins.
With Nancy Carroll (Pepper Gibney); Fredric March (Paul Lockridge); Frank Morgan (Mortimer Gibson); Glen Anders (Ralph De Saint); Diane Ellis (Marjorie Gibson); Leonard Carey (Benham); Billie Burgoyne (Pearl).

Although it has surfaced on tv occasionally, "Laugther" has been strangely unavailable in print form for some time, leading one to the suspicion that it is one of the many Paramount films that have been transferred to videotape to service tv bookings, but that is going to be condemned to theatrical obscurity from here on.

Made at Paramount's Long Island Studios not too long after Mamoulian's "Applause", it doesn't wear quite as well as that classic. Like Chaplin's "A Woman of Paris" it is a film that is remarkable for its time, and was of considerable influence on other films. But in many ways the films that learned from it or copied from it, and that were done much later, are in the long run superior. No discredit to "Laugther", but it's a milestone film rather than a permanent classic. Its wit and its casual sophistication were new and fresh then - perhaps too new for it to be really appreciated. It didn't make it to the NY Times' Best 10 list of 1930 for example, but it was one of the runners-up. (But so was El Brendel's "Just Imagine"!) It needs no apology, merely the ability to regard it as a kind of "Philadelphia Story" film made ten years earlier - and without the production gloss and meticulous pacing and editing that such a story needs, Nancy Carroll is a delight as always, Frank Morgan is once again a consummate (and very moving) straight actor before he was turned into a boisterous comic, and Glen Anders - the slimy heavy from Welles' "The Lady From Shanghai" - also appears in much younger form, though with the same if less obvious slime in tow.

--- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.10.

Fall schedules will be available next week, and I will be back for a wrap-up discussion session.

** Erratum, Jack De Leon was the actor/writer/impressario whose name was so frustratingly omitted;