THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 51: Program #6
November 8, 1985

TWO LATE GERMAN SILENTS: PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT ARRANGED AND PLAYED
BY STUART ODEMAN

HOMECOMING (UFA, 1928) Directed by Joe May; Produced by Erich Pommer;
Camera: Gunther Rittau; Scenarist by Fred Majo and Fritz Wendhausen from
the novel "Karl and Anna" by Leonhard Frank; US release by Paramount;
edited and titled by Julian Johnson; English titles; 75 mins approx.
With Dita Parlo (Anna); Lars Hansen (Richard); Gustav Froelich (Karl)
Theodor Leos (Prisoner on ferry)

Joe May's German period is best-known for its serial-like melodramas and
thrillers, while he personally is perhaps best known as the man who helped
launch Fritz Lang's career. In Hollywood from the early 30's on, May's
directorial career was not prolific but was certainly interesting, highlighted
perhaps by his Kay Francis remake of the German "Maurzka" under the title
"Confession", and for "The Invisible Man Returns". "Homcoming" is perhaps his
least typical production, and certainly (also untypically) more concerned with
art than the boxoffice, but this may be largely due to the omnipresence of
Erich Pommer she-producer.

Though a stylized and slow-moving production, it reaches some surprising
emotional peaks due in no small measure to both the subtlety and intensity of
the acting. Even though her role is perhaps the least demanding of the three
leads, Dita Parle as always brings both beauty and poignancy to a part that
was probably quite one-dimensional in the writing. The possibly excessive
studio-bound stylisation of the early part of the film is doubtless intentional,
so that the prisoner's ultimate release and return to the morass of his home
and his prison for the final two reels makes it in 1947 as "Desire Me"
with Greer Garson and Robert Mitchum; but attempts to update it in post-WW 2
and to overcome censorship problems by turning it far more into a melodrama,
resulted in the film being such a mess that it went out with no director
credit, even though more than one director had labored to salvage it!

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

DIE FRAU, NACH DER MAN SICH SEHT (THE WOMAN MEN YEARN FOR) (Terra Film, 1929)
Directed by Kurt Bernhardt; Scenarist by Ladislas Vajda from a novel by
Max Brod; Camera, Curt Courant; Art Direction, Robert Neppach; German
titles with a spoken translation; 80 mins approx. U.S. release
under the title "Three Loves"

With Udo Henning (Henry LeBlanc); Marlene Dietrich (Stascha); Fritz Kortner
(Dr. Karoff); Edith Edwards (Angela Poirteri); Frida Richard (Mae. LeBlanc);
Oskar Sima (Charles LeBlanc); Bruno Ziener (Phillip, the valet); Karl Ettlinger
(Old Poi trier).

One of the most surprising aspects of this film (unseen in this country since
the early 30's) is that although it is three films prior to "The Blue Angel"
Dietrich's Marie was much more wicked and pushy Lola-Lola; here (in her first femme
fatale role) is already subtle, sophisticated and very much of a siren.
Equally surprising is how director Bernhardt (like Maurice Tourneur in the also
pre-"Blue Angel" "Ship of Lost Men") is aware of the alluring Dietrich
mystique and desire, and uses the camera in a tantalizing way to capture it
in ways usually attributed only to Josef von Sternberg. While it's a
novelistic subject, comparison with "Lulu" is not apt, since Dietrich's
man-destroyer is not too far removed from Louise Brooks' -- and Fritz Kortner
is the unfortunate victim in both cases! While there are echoes of prior
German films - including "Metropolis" and an obsession with the mobile camera - at the same time
Bernhardt is obviously infatuated with Hollywood gloss, and is clearly here
trying to make the kind of slick Hollywood film that would indeed be his forte
when he later got to Hollywood (and primarily Warner Brothers) and would
direct vehicles for Davis, Stanwyck, Sheridan and Hayworth -- and Bogart and
Ronald Reagan too. Screenwriter Vajda and cameraman Courant also later made
theCreek with Dietrich, as did Kortner too of course. While it is perhaps not an avant-garde film, it is a very smartly written and superbly
acted film into bargain. It is a very easy film to follow, but even so
subtitles are surprisingly few, and obvious jump cuts within scenes indicate
that for some reason or another (possibly decomposition, since titles always
go first) titles have been removed. (Dietrich really has the lead but appears
fairly low in the cast, indicating that this is as the film appeared originally
since a later reissue would certainly and justifiably have boosted her to top
billing).

-- William K. Everson
Program ends app. 10.25. Discussion session follows.