THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 54: Program #6
November 10, 1946

(A Tasteful) Grand Guignol program for Halloween

LATIN QUARTER (British National production for Anglo-American release, 1945)
Direction and screenplay by Vernon Sewell, from a play "L'Angoisse" by Pierre Mills and C. de Vylers; Camera, Gunther Krampf and Gerald Moss; produced by Louis Jackson and Derrick de Marney; released in the U.S. in 1946 by Four Continents Films under the title "Frenzy"; 75 mins. Music: Alan Gray With: Derrick de Marney (Charles Garrie); Frederick Valk (Dr. Krasner); Joan Green (Christine Minetti); Joan Seton (Lucille); Beresford Egan (Minetti); Lilly Kahn (Maria); Maurice Miller (Stuart Kipps); Valentine Dyall (Prefect); Anthony Hewtway (Specialist); Bruce Winston (friend); Sybilla Bänder (medium)

"Latin Quarter" is hardly an outstanding film, but it is an extremely absorbing one; a film we have literally been sitting on for about ten years to find the right companion film. Director of Photography, I think, an ideal mate for it, since both are stylistal and individual films that are in an creating a sense of unease rather than terror. Both are macabre without being horrific; it's undoubtedly the mildest Halloween show on view tonight, but also probably the most interesting. Incidentally, "Corridor of Mirrors" is a film we've been looking for for years. Often in the past, such a search has been nipped in the bud by having the Museum of Modern Art suddenly show the film just as we were about to announce it. Just for once, the reel is on the other projector -- the Museum is about to show "Corridor of Mirrors" in its "new" British cycle (referred to in last week's notes) and, quite coincidentally and unintentionally, tonight's showing predates theirs by a few weeks. Many of you may well be glad of a chance to see the film a second time on that occasion.

Vernon Sewell, who wrote and directed, was in a very loose sense Britain's own Edgar Umler. He specialised in macabre thrillers, and seemed to do some of his most interesting work on minuscule budgets. Most of his work was done in the 40's, 50's and 60's; although his first film as a director was in 1934, he spent most of the 50's making only a handful of quickies and documentaries. Powell and Pressburger gave him a major break in 1942 by assigning to him the direction of their "The Silver Fleet", and from that point on his career was quite prolific.

"Latin Quarter", even allowing for a very economic budget, is probably his best film, and is based on a ghost story he seemed very fond of. It provided the material for his first film, a 1934 quota-quicicle for MGM, "The Medium", running only 38 minutes. And he returned to the same story in 1952, re-doing it for British National, which produced the film, was smallest of the British production studios, or the biggest of the independents, depending on one's perspective. Fortuitously, they had a tie-in with the huge ABC circuit, which showed all the MGM and Warner product, and an exhibition outlet was virtually guaranteed. Their studio was quite big and sets could sometimes be quite elaborate, but, like FRC in Hollywood, they tended to get talent either on the way up or on the way down. Most of their films were heavy and old-fashioned, and only a handful stand out: 1953's "The Turn of the Tide", and "Love on the Dole" and "Girl of the Golden West", or "Latin Quarter" was a programmer -- more important than their "B" comedies, but not one from which they expected a great deal. Fortunately it turned out to be a good film; it got good reviews, and also had the luck to be released shortly after "Dead of Night" so that it cashed in on both that film's momentum and the vogue it created for the serious ghost story.

Budget shortcomings are quite evident, yet Sewell (like Umler) uses ingenuity to overcome them. The tricky opening shot (a slow pan over the rooftops of Paris) is typical. The use of a backdrop is never in question, yet it's an atmospherically pleasing shot and the segue into a full-scale set is neatly done. Sewell has no hesitation in beefing up his own script by borrowing from other sources, but beginning a big chunk of Eva Moore dialogue from "The Old Dark House" is shameless, to put it mildly. Only in one sense is the film rather badly let down, and that is in the 2nd rate atmosphere and performance of Beresford Egan as the mad artist-villain, a role calling for bravura plus subtlety in the Lionel Atwill tradition. Herbert Lom could have pulled it off, and he did make films for British National around that time -- but he was already a star of sorts, and clearly the budget couldn't afford him for a supporting role. Frederick Valk, in a virtual reprise of his "Dead of Night" psychiast ... a supporting role. Frederick Valk, in a virtual reprise of his "Dead of Night" psychiast ... a supporting role. Frederick Valk, in a virtual reprise of his "Dead of Night" psychiast ... a supporting role. Frederick Valk, in a virtual reprise of his "Dead of Night" psychiast ...

"Latin Quarter" has many uncomfortably chilling moments, and of course was more effective in 1945 when horror, especially in British film, was not such a stock commodity. The print is of the American release, and is shortened by some five minutes, but purely to quicker pace. Actually the cut, involving a time lapse, does not do much damage. The only censural cuts are several damn, removed from the sound track. Sewell's last films, "Blood Beast Terror" and "The Crimson Altar", were made in 1966. Now in his mid-50's, he's in great shape, retired, and spends much of his time touring the European sea lanes on his "Ghost Ship" yacht. -- Ten Minute Intermission --
CORRIDOR OF MIRRORS (Apollo Films-General Film Distributors, 1948)
Directed by Terrence Young; produced by Rudolph Cartier; Screenplay by Cartier and Edana Romney; Camera, Andre Thomas; Music, Georges Auric;
Based on a novel by Chris Massey; U.S. release in 1949 by Universal; 95 mins.
With: Eric Portman (Paul Margin); Edana Romney (Mifanwy Conway); Barbara Mullen (Veronica); Hugh Sinclair (Owen Rhys); Bruce Beifrage (Sir David Conway); Joan Maude (Caroline Hart); Alan Wheatley (Edgar Orsen); Leslie Weston (Mortimer); Lois Maxwell (Imogen); Valentine Dyall (Defence lawyer); Christopher Lee (Charles) and Mavis Villiers, Thora Hird, John Penrose, Noel Howlett.
"Corridor of Mirrors" is quite one of the most unique British films of the 40's, and while appropriate in mood for a Halloween showing, virtually unclassifiable since it is neither romance, melodrama, fantasy nor thriller, though incorporating elements from all of those areas. British reviews on the whole were quite good, recognizing its good intentions, and admittedly biased in its favor because British films then were still coasting on the momentum of their wartime renaissance. It is a fragile film though and an easy one to destroy, as the NY Times did, calling it preposterous and dull.
Clearly it was designed to be a "prestige" art film, and also one designed to exploit Edana Romney (who co-stars and co-scripts) and hopefully turn her into a major star. Romney, had been seen earlier in "Alibi", had not made it to stardom then, and this second attempt several years later likewise didn't work. The critics were a bit cruel about the "vanity" aspects of the production at the time, commenting on the excessive closeups of Miss Romney. This seems far less irritating or even apparent today, perhaps because we have now become conditioned to extremes in "vanity" production by Barbra Streisand, Eddie Murphy, Prince and their ilk.
Although there are only indirect parallels, in both plot structure and sometimes even in individual scenes, "Corridor of Mirrors" is heavily influenced by both "Brief Encounter" and "La Belle et la Bete", recent artistic triumphs. The Georges Auric score perhaps stresses the affinity to the Cocteau film rather more, but those familiar with "Brief Encounter" will recognize its influence too - particularly in the climactic scene between Romney and Hugh Sinclair. If one is going to borrow, one might as well borrow from the best, especially in one's first film. Terrence Young had been a screenwriter since 1939's "On the Night of the Fire" (one of the highly recommended obscurities in the Museum's upcoming British cycle) and had made some wartime documentaries, but this was his first narrative film as a director. Its decidedly arty qualities were hardly a portent of things to come: most of Young's later films were resolutely commercial, Hollywoodian in their gloss, and included some of the best earlier James Bond films.
Eric Portman was then at the peak of his psycho/sophisticated killer period, in the midst of films like "Wanted For Murder", "Dearest Murderer" and "Daybreak".
"Corridor of Mirrors" is a strange film, lyrical, romantic, sometimes quite moving. The "mystery" element probably works the least, since a type-cast supporting role does tend to telegraph a bit of the plot. There are really too many disparate elements for it to work as a cohesive whole, but it's fascinating, handsome, unpredictable and the kind of film you'll probably always remember with a degree of fondness and respect, even if it doesn't entirely come off. A minor bonus for devotees of film history trivia is that Christopher Lee's small part was also his first.

William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10:40.
Brief discussion period follows.

A further reminder in case we've missed anybody to date. The distributors have withdrawn the films booked for our Nov.21 program, and the substitute program is TWO AGAINST THE WORLD (1932, Constance Bennett) and THE BIG SHOT (1942, Humphrey Bogart).