THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 56: Program #2
June 24 1987

ISLAND OF LOST MEN (Paramount, 1939) Directed by Kurt Neumann
Screenplay by William R. Lipman and Horace McCoy, from an original
story by Norman Reilly Raine and Frank Butler; Camera, Karl Strauss;
63 mins.

With Anna May Wong, J. Carrol Naish, Anthony Quinn, Eric Blore, Ernest Truex,
Broderick Crawford, William Haade, Rudolf Forster, Richard Loo.

A remake of last week's "White Woman", sufficiently different to be
interesting on its own, but particularly interesting as an example of the
standards now demanded by the Production Code. Sex has given way to action
and jungle melodrama, the races are carefully segregated, yet within it's a
tight, classy little "B", helped as were so many of its ilk at Paramount
by the superb lighting and camerawork of Karl Strauss. Of interest too is
the performance of German refugee Rudolf Forster (of The Threepenny Opera)
in an acting career in Hollywood, but returned to German films after the war. Incidentally, while last week's "A"
"White Woman" opened at the Rialto, its "B" remake fared rather better,
premiering on the other side of Times Square at the Criterion.

-- 10 Minute Intermission --

THE GENERAL DIED AT DAWN (Paramount, 1936) Directed by Lewis Milestone
Produced by William Le Baron; Screenplay by Clifford Odets; Camera,
Vctor Milner; Music, Werner Jannesen; 97 mins.

With Gary Cooper (O'Hara); Madeleine Carroll (Judy Perrie); Akim Tamiroff
(General Yang); Dudley Digges (Mr. Wu); Porter Hall (Peter Perrie); William
Frawley (Brighton); J. M. Kerrigan (Leach); Philip Ann (Oxford); Lee Tung Foo
(Mr. Cheng); Lenoid Kinskey (Stewart); Val Duran (Wong); Willie Fung (Bartender);
Paul Harvey, Sarah Edwards (American couple); Hans Van Moorhaut (The Mandarin);
Hans Forberg, Russell Hicks, Benson Fong and Tetsu Komai, and
Clifford Odets, John O'Hara, Sidney Skolak and Lewis Milestone (Reporters).

"The General Died at Dawn" was an enormous popular and critical success in
1936, widely regarded as one of the year's top pictures. And what a year
it was for Cooper, with, apart from this film, "The Plainsman", "Desire" and
"Mr. Deeds Goes To Town" competing with it the same year! Yet it has
been strangely unloved in recent years, given no theatrical or archival
showings since 1960 and no other showings since we last played it
in 1968 (unless a Theatre 80 showing slipped into that nearly 20-year period).

Reappraisers somehow found it "too slow", although in point of fact, apart
from being a bit longer, it is no slower than von Sternberg's "Shanghai Express" which continued to remain in favor. What worked against it was probably that it remained very serious in mien, and thus could not be
considered a "fun" picture, and its surprisingly formal, almost rigid
 technique, so much locked in to film-making styles of the early 30's. These
styles do date a little, yet they also still work and have a certain
academic fascination on their own.

Although an outgrowth of the "Yellow Peril" films of the earlier 30's, it is
also somewhat of a forerunner to the socially-conscious war films of the
late 30's and early 40's: "Blockade", "Foreign Correspondent" and "For Whom
the Bell Tolls". It also contains more than a few echoes - stylistic as well
as thematic - of G.W. Pabst's late German silent, "The Love of Jeannne Ney".

Surprisingly, the writing by Odets is less concerned than one would suspect
in arousing the public conscience, but it does remind us very often that he
was essentially a writer for the theatre of the 30's. "Peculiar" is about
the only word to describe some of it. Sometimes the film lurches to a halt
to allow for a long dialogue exchange between Cooper and Carroll (replacing
Kerrigan since O'Hara was ill) which seems to have nothing in common with either
the mood or the plot of the picture. And even when Odets has purged himself,
one gets the impression that several pages of script have been jinked to
make up for lost time. This makes it difficult to be sure whether or not
there is a scene missing (cut for post-Code reissue?) near the beginning. The
running time is correct, there is no physical sign of a cut, and if there
were such a scene it would have - judging from the film's prevailing pace
- to run about a reel. As led up to and written, the script quite creatively
elimates much exposition and introduces us to Cooper and Carroll at their
second meeting. It works, but it is strange movie-making for the methodical
1930's. Did their initial meeting, a hinted seduction, take place off-screen,
or was it cut -- as were so many Paramount films of the 30's when reissued
in the 50's? My own memory of the film from 1936 is hazy on this point,
and many enquiries - on the occasion of our first showing of the film nearly
20 years ago, and in the years since, have failed to provide a concrete
answer.

-- William K. Everson

Program Ends approx. 10.20