THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 61: Program #4
March 2, 1989
A CAROLE LOMBARD PROGRAM
THE GAY BRIDE ( MGM, 1934) Directed by Jack Conway; produced by John W. Considine jr.; Screenplay by Bella and Samuel Spewack from the original
story "Repeal" by Charles Francis Coe; Camera, Ray June; Music by Jack
Virgil; NY premiere, Rialto Theatre. 80 mins.
With: Carole Lombard (Mary); Chester Morris (Office Boy); Zasu Pitts (Mirabelle)
Nat Pendleton (Shoots Magiz); Leo Carrillo (Mickey); Sam Hardy (Dingle); Walter
Walker (MacPherson); Gene Lockhart (Jim Smiley); Edward Le Saint (minister);
Francis MacDonald (hood); Brooks Benedict (wedding guest); Irving Bacon (weight-
guesser); Philo McCullough (gangster)
With the first gangster cycle running its course, and the Production Code
breathing down Hollywood's neck, one solution was a series of gangster
comedies which ranged from Edward G. Robinson's "The Whole Town's Talking" to its much
later "A Slant Case of Murder", and which also included a secondary series of
films featuring comedians with their own versions of the gangster comedy.
Tay Garnett's "Woman Tamer" was one of the best of these: "The Gay Bride" was
one of the first. Little seen (its last NY showing, and many missed it then,
as part of MoMA's extensive comedy cycle many years ago) it was apparently
dumped by MGM (note its opening at the Rialto!) who made no attempt to sell
it, though this may have been because it opened just before Christmas and MGM
was concentrating on promoting "David Copperfield" at the time. It's a misfire,
true: it doesn't have the bite and guts it would have had in pre-Code days, and
even if it's better than Warners would have. And the wailing of an original straight
straight gangster story to a new comedic approach results in a certain
uneasiness. Lombard's character lacks sympathy, and the gangsters are
so likeable that when they start knocking each other off, there's a sense of
disappointment. Nevertheless, reviews were generally good, Carole Lombard is a
delight and looks stunning even though it isn't one of her best roles, and
audiences in '34 seemed to have a good time - as I'm sure they will today.
Perhaps its most interesting aspect is that it is virtually a 54 year prelude to
"The Honeymooners" ('55). Incidentally, the phrase is even invoked by Zasu
Pitts which had some comic effect and it's certainly a more entertaining if less ambitious film than that much over-rated movie.
-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

VIGIL IN THE NIGHT (Rko Radio, 1940) Produced and Directed by George Stevens
Screenplay by Fred Guiol, P. J. Wolfson and Rowland Leigh from the novel by
A.J. Cronin; Camera, Robert de Grasse; Music by Alfred Newman; NY opening,
Roxy Theatre: 96 mins.
With: Carole Lombard (Anne Lee); Brian Aherne (Dr. Prescott); Anne Shirley
Lucy Lee); Julien Mitchell (Matthew Boley); Robert Coote (Dr. Caley); Brenda
Forbes (Nora); Rita Page (Glennie); Peter Cushing (Joe Shand); Ethel Griffies
(Matron East); Doris Lloyd (Mrs. Boley); Emily Fitzroy (Sister Gibson);
Rafaelo Ottiano (Mrs Sullivan); Walis Clark (Peterson).
For director Stevens, "Vigil in the Night" came between "Gunga Din" and "Penny
Serenade" and was his most "serious" film to date; for Lombard, it was between
"In Name Only" and "They Knew What They Wanted" and for her too it was the most
totally "serious" role she'd tackled. It has a reputation of being so heavy
that Lombard was supposed to have said "I'm a little mouse when I'm not
hungry". I'm inclined to think that it was heavy in the early days of World War Two,
when "heavy" films relating to pre-war conditions suddenly seemed insignificant if not obsolete. Also, while
the novels (and films based on them) are on medical themes by A.J. Cronin and Lloyd
C. Douglas were still very popular, most of them had healthy doses of religion and
sentimental appeal, while "Vigil" seemed resolutely stark and devoid of
to blame. While a much under-rated film, "Vigil in the Night" does have
serious flaws. The trio of screenwriters (one essentially a comedic writer)
seen ill-assorted, and the screenplay gives the impression that only surviving this
of having been based on the Good Housekeeping serialisation rather than the novel.
Nothing in it is really false, but it seems contrived and too even episodic,
way current made-for-tv films are constructed to allow for regular
"climax'es" followed by commercials. Moreover, the film does paint a rather too
grim picture of medical services in England at the time, as though there were
no brighter side at all. Finally, Alfred Newman's score is musically well below
his normal standards and in addition drones on incessantly, leaving no spaces for
respite or quiet reflections. This said, the film has much in its
favor, including excellent photography (especially in the closing episode), some
interesting sets, and especially interesting supporting performances.
Peter Cushing in the biggest of his few Hollywood roles at this time is especially
good, as is another Britisher new to Hollywood, Julien Mitchell. (One wonders
how Rko were able to resist the temptation to enlarge that role and cast Charles
Laughton!) The inquiry scene is particularly well done, and although he loved
them, Stevens keeps glossy closeups to a minimum. Presumably he inserted that
cunning line of dialogue (after the bus crash) where Dr. Aherne dubs Lombard's
cheek and assures her that the scar won't show much -- thus avoiding the use of
inappropriate makeup and lighting to hide her real scar!

Wm.K.Everson
Program ends: 10:45 p.m. no discussion session.