TWO THIRTY MELODRAMAS

TORCH SINGER (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Alexander Hall and George Somnes; Screenplay by Lenore Coffee and Lynn Starling from "Mike" by Grace Perkins; Camera, Karl Strauss; 74 mins. NY premiere: Paramount Theatre. (Last New School showing, October 1970)

With Claudette Colbert (Sally Trent); Ricardo Cortez (Tony Cummings); David Manners (Michael Gardner); Lydia Roberti (Dora); Baby LeRoy (Bobby); Florence Roberts (Mother Angelica); Cora Sue Collins (Little Sally); Helen Jerome Eddy (Miss Spaulding); Charlie Grapewin (Mr. Judson) and Shirley Ann Christensen, Ethel Griffies, Mildred Washington, Albert Conti, Virginia Hammond, Kathleen Burke, Davison Clark, William B. Davidson, Bobby Arnst, Edward Le Saint, James Burke.

When "Torch Singer" opened at the Times Square Paramount in 1933, it was bolstered on stage by Sally Rand and Milton Berle, something we can't duplicate (although I might try a couple of one-liners in the intro). Amably but not too seriously received by the press, it was clearly somewhat submerged in the plethora of soap-operas and tear-jerkers that were so popular at the time (there is a definite if thin line between those two generalizations and today, when this kind of material is largely limited to television, it will probably seen a good deal better and less formalised. It is in any case a real curiosity, a stark, Warner Brothers lynx of sex and confession melodrama, but done with the glossier, ladies' magazine approach prevalent at Paramount, further upgradied by Karl Strauss' cinematography, and steering clear of the raw but more honest characters who populated such stories at Warners. None of it is too credible, and since Miss Colbert rises from uned mother to luxury white unworldly speed, it doesn't even have the superficial realism of the parallel Chatterton and Starnegy travels at Burbank. It's also hard to understand why Ricardo Cortez constantly harasses the highly paid entertainer by rasping "But you're a torch-singer!" as though she was even lower on the social scale than those perennial victims of the Hollywood caste system, the whore and the schoolchildren. However, it's an enormously enjoyable film, partly because it's so brash that the manufactured sob stories never have time to congeal, but mainly because of Colbert who holds the whole thing together with an absolutely tour-de-force performance. She not only runs the gamut emotionally, but puts on a remarkable show as a singer. Clearly it is her own voice, and she not only sings well but "sells" her songs in terms of style, stance and body movements. It's an aspect of the Colbert personality that never seemed very likely and the surprising thing is that Hollywood didn't thrust her into more of the same, and develop roles - as it did for Irene Dunne - allowing for a combination of drama and song.

— Ten Minute Intermission —

INTERNES CAN'T TAKE MONEY (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Alfred Santell; Produced by Benjamin Glazer; Screenplay by Alan James and Theodore Reeves from a story by Max Brand; Camera, Theodore Sparkuhl; Musical Score, Gregory Stone; 79 mins; NY premiere, Paramount Theatre; (Last New School showing, April 1975)

With Barbara Stanwyck (Janet Hayley); Joel McCrea (Jimmy Kildare); Lloyd Nolan (Hanlon); Stanley Ridges (Innes); Gaylord Pendleton (Interme Jones); Lee Bowman (Interme Weeks); Irving Bacon (Jeff); Barry McCollum ("Stooly" Martin); Pierre Watkin (Dr. Pearson) and Charles Lane, James Bush, Nick Lukats, Anthony Mace, Fay Holden, Frank Bruno, Jack Mihall, Peter George Lynn, Harvey Clark.

Knocking this original "Dr. Kildare" story off quite easily after a few weeks in hospital, Max Brand could have had no idea of the gold-mine he was creating for himself and especially for MGM. This initial Kildare entry foreshadowed some of the plot elements that would reappear in the later MGM series, though for the most part it has little in common with them, though by an odd coincidence, Gaylord Pendleton's brother Nat played a parallel intern role in many of the later ones. Alfred Santell was a director being taken very seriously as a "hitchcockian" (though it was by no means one of his best films) and the NY Times referred to "Internes..." as being Hitchcockian in style. The idealistic young doctor had replaced the aviator and the cowboy as the #1 American hero in movies of the 30's, and reputedly Paramount bought this story at the urging of McCrea who felt that no one would make a good movie but also a good series. Paramount thought otherwise about the latter idea, limiting their series films to strictly "B" product. There's no Dr. Gillespie either, although Paramount could have inducted Lewis Stone, Akim Tamiroff, Sir Guy Standing or H.B. Warner (even John Barrymore) if they'd had a mind to. Neither all-out medical drama nor concentrated gags, it's a very neat combination of both, with the performances of Nolan and Ridges in supporting roles adding a great deal of strength. In terms of set design and camerawork, the predominant influence is German - not surprising in view of an art director (Rans Herrer) and cameraman who once worked with Dupont -- but obviously the decision to utilise this style was Santell's and the film is a very creditable exercise in the Fritz Lang manner. Oddly enough, the Lang film it most resembles is "You and Me" -- which wasn't made until the following year! But it's probable that Santell had seen " Fury" (1936) and that his film then had some feedback effect on Lang. The stylised, symbolic shot of Stanwyck buying popcorn in the street (not as pretentious a statement as it sounds: that one shot circumvents a sticky censorship problem) is almost undrilled lang.

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Stanwyck's performance is one of her best up to that time, and she is used and photographed well. The one time she seems about to launch into her obligatory near-hysterics scene, she is neatly cut off by the script — or by Santell. She was also a particularly felicitous co-star for Joel McCrea; this was the second of a quartet of films that they made together.

Beautifully mounted, full of careful lighting and interesting mobility of the camera, "Internees Can't Take Money" (a dull and uninteresting title for such a good movie, though it does have some relation to the plot) is perhaps more interesting for its style than its content, but its plot is holding and well-written, with colorful and unconventional characters to give some edge to the plotting. Too, its basically more realistic than its current counterpart films at MGM, "Between Two Women" and "Men in White". Admittedly, McCrea has a well-groomed look, but it's not as overdone as with Gable and Franchot Tone. For a $10 a month internee he does hop in and out of taxis with rather too much abandon, but when he buys food and flowers for his girl, the budgetary outlay seems realistic.

One might however question the medical and psychological methods of orphan asylums that trot out the orphans, line-up style, to test the mother's ability to recognise her own child! One hopes at least that the rejected children are rotated and that the same red herrings aren't put on display on each occasion, building up monumental traumas in the process!

"Internees" not being a universally understood term in the 30's, the film presented titling problems abroad. Throughout the British Empire it bore the rather undelayly title of "Student Doctors Can't Take Money".

----- William K. Everson ----

Program ends approx.10.34.
Discussion/Question session follows.

Please note that I will be on hand for programs 1, 2 and 6.
Programs 3, 4, 5 will start promptly at 7.30 without intros.