An evening of quiet literary charm


With: Roland Young (Pram Farrow); Lillian Gish (Alice Hunter); Montagu Love (Janet Farrow); Lumsden Hare (Mrs. Oxford); Lucy Beaumont (Mrs. Leek); Charles Richman (Mr. Witt); Roland Hogue (Henry Leek); Oliver Smith, Philip Tongue (Leek Twins); Audrey Ridgwell (Lady Helen).

I had forgotten that the Museum of Modern Art had screened "His Double Life" over the past ten years, but it is still not a familiar or readily available film and well worth this additional exposure. Arnold Bennett's "Buried Alive" has thus far been filmed three times, tonight's version having been preceded by a silent one with Lionel Barrymore, and succeeded by the best of the trio, the 40's "Holy Matrimony" with Monty Woolley and Gracie Fields. In the early 60's it also saw new life as a Broadway musical with Vincent Price. Today writers like Bennett, Alice Duer Miller and James Barrie are forgotten figures insofar as the movies are concerned unfortunately. "His Double Life" is a charming and relaxed trifle, a thoroughly civilised if minor work that belonged to the thirties and early forties, but would never be attempted in the blockbuster-oriented fare of today. It offers pleasant people, a good little story, chuckles and above all charm. Lillian Gish, in her second talkie (and last one for a long time) is thoroughly delightful if a shade too graceless to be totally convincing as a sensible, middle-class Englishwoman, while Roland Young seems unable to put a foot wrong in this kind of thing. (The NY Times felt that the film was superior to the NY stage versions primarily because of these two performances). Some comedy bits misfire, and the trial scene was not handled with the same deftness as in the play and attempts to go Lubitsch isn't as clever as it thinks it is. But the lines are bright, the production was helped by a lovely musical score, and the English milieu generally quite convincing, the more so since the whole film was shot at Paramount's Astoria Studios without the benefit of any exterior locations. Directorially it is almost a one-man show by Arthur Hopkins, whose first film it was. Miss Gish doesn't recall doing any scenes under DeMille (although production stills establish that he was certainly involved), but since this was very much his kind of fare, the chances are he was kept around in an advisory capacity and to supervise the mechanics of it all, a fairly common collaborative policy in the earlier days of sound when so many new directors were being brought in from the theatre.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE HOUSEMASTER (Associated British Picture Corp., 1938) Directed by Herbert Brenon; screenplay by Dudley Leslie and Elizabeth Neenan from the story and play by Ian Hay; Camera, Otto Kanturek; released in the US by Alliance, edited to 7 reels; Original length and of our print tonight, 95 mins; last New School showing, April 1975.

With: Otto Kruger (Charles Donkin); Diana Churchill (Rosemary Farningdon); Philip de Courville (Philip de Courville); Joyce Barbour (Barbara Plane); Rene Ray (Chris Farningdon); Kynaston Reeves (Rev. Edmund Owlington); Walter Hudd (Frank Hastings); John Wood (Freddie Nightingale); Cecil Parker (Sir Berkeley Nightingale); Henry Hewport (Bermo Farningdon); Michael Shepley (Victor Beamish); Jimmy Hanley (Travers); and Raymond Barnes, Lawrence Kitchin.

A light-weight "Goodbye Mr. Chips", "The Housemaster" is almost certainly the best talkie of a major silent director, Herbert Brenon ("Peter Pan", "A Kiss for Cinderella", "Beau Geste"), a generalisation likely to be challenged only if his long-lost early Hollywood talkie "The Case of Sergeant Grischa" ever materialises. Brenon's early sound Hollywood career failed to re-establish his earlier prestige, and his final films (1935-40) were made in England. He and author Ian Hay made a most felicitous team. Hay's forte was primarily light farce ("The Middle Watch") and his more serious essays were never too serious. There was always an equal amount of humanity, froth and whimsy in his work, and Brenon, of a like temperament, here translates his novel and play (renamed "Bachelor Born") to the screen with a great deal of fidelity. "The Housemaster" isn't a great film - it is doubtful that any "great" film could derive from a Hay work - but it is warm and human and contains a great deal of truth. Its faults are also those of Hay; one longs for the potential dramatic strength to crystallise into powerful scenes, and one in a while they do - as in the insecure teacher's discovery of his own strength, or the Housemaster's moving farewell to his boys - but it does take a long time for the dramatic conflicts to get under way, and there seems to be too much flippancy in the earlier sections. (Doubtless this is why the US distributor cut it so drastically.) On the whole though, allowing for the leisurely placement of its highlights and the at-times too obvious ideas and use of back projection, it's a most satisfying and enjoyable film. If it had nothing else, it would be worthwhile for the magnificent playing of Kynaston Reeves as the fanatic headmaster, perhaps one of the best performances in British film. (One only wishes that he had a jealous, waispish Ernest Thesiger as his second in command!) Even the skill and sincerity of Otto Kruger's playing pale beside Mr. Reeves. Incidentally, Phillips Holmes' role - one of his best - was his last. He was killed in the early days of World War Two.

Program ends 10:35.

Brief discussion session follows.

--- William K. Everson