DANCERS IN THE DARK (Paramount, 1932) Directed by David Burton; Screenplay by Brian Marlow, Howard Emmett Rogers and Herman C. Hankiewicz from the play "Jazz King" by James Ashmore Creekman (Creekman), Karl Sasna (NY premiere, Paramount Theatre, with a stage and costumes by Fred Allen and Mimi Shaw, 74 mins. The Cast: Mariam Hopkins (Gloria); Jack Oakie (Duke); William Collier jr. (Floyd); George Raft (Louie); Eugene Pallette (Gus); Walter Hiers (Collie); Lyda Roberti (Fanny); Maurice Black (Max); Frances Moffett (Ruby); Dewitt Jennings (McCoody); Alberta Vaughn (Marie); Paul Fix (Benny); Mary Gordon (cleaning lady); Kent Taylor (musician); Muriel Evans (taxi dancer).

Apart from both being Paramount films released in the middle of 1932, tonight's two films have a number of other things in common. Both, for example, benefit from the fine camerawork of Karl Strauss, one of Hollywood's top camerographers, and both are "casual" pre-Code films. That is to say that they contain elements and situations that would quite certainly have been modified after 1934, but neither are they wildly uninhibited films that exploit the freedom permitted in the pre-Code era.

From its slick opening titles, "Dancers in the Dark" is a solidly satisfying little film, going overboard on neither the music nor the dramatics, yet delivering well in both areas. The fact that virtually everybody in the cast is identified only by the Christian names is something of a tip-off to the casual entertainment that ensues. Strauss' strong cinematography, and an excellent (or at least, colorful and attention-getting) performance from George Raft offset the disadvantages of a weak hero (Collier) and an irritatingly-written role for Oakie, which has him shuffling back and forth between hero and heel. However, Mariam Hopkins, who could be abrasive at times, and in any case is an acquired taste, is remarkably effective and touching as the heroine. Her costumes almost rate billing in themselves. Lyda Roberti is as delightful as always in support (even though her song is almost undesiriable) and the background score is full of familiar melodies from "Monte Carlo." The writing of the band's dialogues is perhaps a little banal, but in the interests of relative realism it was probably so intended. Although it didn't receive remarkably enthusiastic reviews, the film holds up extremely well and, only dates, if at all, in some of the now-cliched type-casting, Paul Fix in particular.

-Guilt As Hell (Paramount, 1932) Directed by Erle C. Kenton; Screenplay by Arthur Kober and Frank Partos from the play "Mild He This" by Daniel L. Ruben, Qamer, Karl Strauss; NY premiere, August 1932, Paramount Theatre, with a stage show headed by Harry Richman, 81 mins. The Cast: Edmund Lowe (Russell Kirk); Victor McLaglen (McKinley); Richard Arlen (Frank Marsh); Ralph Ince (Jack Reed); Henry Stephenson (Dr. Tindall); Adrienne Ames (Vera Marsh); Elizabeth Patterson (Mrs. Ward); Noel Francis (Julia Reed); Arnold Lucy (Dr. Sully); William Robertson (Sgt. Alcock); Fred Kelsey (Duffy); Earl Pingree (Detective Brown); Lilian Haver (Mrs Arlin); Gordon Westcott (Dr. Goodman); Claire Dodd (Mrs Tindall); Charles Synder (Delivery boy); William B. Davidson (Governor); Richard Tucker (District Attorney); Harold Braggit (Governor's secretary); Elsa Peters (Vera's maid); Clifford Dempsey (Judge); Oscar Smith (Vandor)

Erle C. Kenton was a journeyman director but a good one (he did "Island of Lost Souls" for Paramount the same year) and manages to get a surprising amount of suspense out of a story that tips its hand to the audience by revealing the murderer in a really jolting opening scene. For the first half of the film he seems content to cater to the Lowe-McLaglen fans by concentrating on them; then when the suspense needs to pile up for the climax, he increases the tempo and brings in some fancy cutting and angles to spice things up. Like its co-feature, it has no delusions of grandeur but succeeds admirably in doing what it sets out to do - entertain in a manner that is both efficient and stylish. That opening murder scene by the way may well have influenced one of the most famous of Hitchcock's tricky camera effects in "Strangers on a Train." Lowe and McLaglen as sparring partners work well as usual (for a more traditional teaming see their 2nd Flagg and Quirt film, "The Cockeyed World" here later this season - while a 1920 Lowe is on view in our silent program next week) but on this occasion the teaming is less stereotyped thanks to a sense of mutual respect which appears at the half-way point as the film's best and most serious. lauded by the film was generally mistaken for the murderer and the role enlarged slightly to justify his billing; Lynn Overman and Charles Bickford took the Lowe-McLaglen roles, though playing slightly less as a team, and Elizabeth Patterson played the same role in both films - something she did more than once; it was an enjoyable time-killer, certainly hurt by Code modifications, but it had less "class" than the original, and a good deal less pep and suspense in its closing reel. With its interesting art-deco sets, effective camera mobility and of course its cast, "Guilt As Hell" is undated and still most entertaining. Incidentally in England the film was retitled "Merrily We Go To Hell" in titles; they'd allowed "Hell's Angels," but Paramount had less luck. Their "Merrily We Go To Hell" was retitled "Merrily We Go To ---", and "Guilt As Hell" became "Guilt As Charged".

Discussion/Questions follow

Note: The new issue of "American Cinematographer", available at most magazine stores, contains an excellent (and long and detailed) article on D.W. Griffith's 1924 "America". Recommended reading before our showing later this semester.