WILLIAM POWELL: Two early talkies -- 1928/1929.

INTERFERENCE

(Paramount, 1928) Directed by Roy Pomeroy; adapted by Hope Loring from the 1929 play of the same title by Roland Pertwee and Harold Dearden; continuity, Louise Long; additional dialogue, Ernest Pascal; cameraman, Tony Gerrard; 82 mins. (Silent version directed by Lethar Mendez); NY premiere, October 8, 1928.

With: William Powell (Phillip Voase); Evelyn Brent (Deborah Kane); Clive Brook (Sir John Marlay); Doris Kenyon (Faith Marlay); Tom Ricketts (Charles); Brandon Hurst (Inspector Haynes); Louis Payne (Childs); Wilfrid Noy (Dr. Gray); Donald Stuart (Freddie); Raymond Lawrence (reporter).

It must be admitted at the outset that "Interference" is an academic and historic milestone that remains just that; 80% of its interest today lies in these areas, with the interesting star names perhaps accounting for the other 20%. Yet when it opened its leading role had Daniel Frohman speaking of the film as an absolute triumph, heralding new frontiers for the theatre on film. And the critics echoed this, pointing out that the film had learned from all the earlier talkies, was technically perfect, and had only a few flaws dramatically. Since the film is slow and generally unimaginative, it is hard to accept this praise today -- but one has to remember that films were making remarkable strides in those early days of sound, and that from good directors at least, new movies could make obsolete successes of only a month or two earlier. "Interference" was released early in 1929 -- the same year as "Hallelujah", "Bulldog Drummond" and "Applause" which look ten years away at least. But it was made in 1928, and that outsize enthusiasm, coupled perhaps with a good deal of hype, is understandable. And Roy Pomeroy who directed, probably lifting only a few scenes from Mendes' silent version, was essentially a technician ("Peter Pan", "The Ten Commandments") whose directorial experience up to that point was nil, and was to be minimal thereafter. John Eames in his generally disastrous and certainly error-ridden "The Paramount Story" lambastes the film mercilessly, attacking the claustrophobic sets and the non-stop stream of dialogue. Presumably he really thought the film quite adequate, and if anything -- given the slow pace and restricted locales of the plot -- there's a lot of dialogue. An attempt is made to keep the dialogue down to informational necessities so that it seems rather stilted. Presumably the dialogue of the original play had a good deal of pungency and wit, and one must assume that little of it was used. Moreover, long periods are played silent -- long reactions are held while the character involved plots his/her next move -- without music (not surprisingly) and often without sound effects. People walk without making a sound -- yet one hears a pen scratching on paper, and at one point birds twittering in the background. It's a strange movie all around and yet it seems unfair to attack it for its lack of basic cinematic technique when it was, at the time, treading such new ground. The film opened in New York in the year -- but it was shorter, faster, and one can say was basically familiar silent melodrama and granding on sound, talk and songs, and still having to resort to frequent subtitles to retain coherence. One might say the same of "The Singing Fool", which had far more silent passages than is generally remembered. But "Interference" was breaking new ground, trying to establish a theatre-to-screen tradition, and moreover doing it with a technician rather than a director at the helm. It deserves respect if not admiration, and in a way we are extremely lucky that, primitive or not, it survives. Otherwise "historians" would be repeating all those early claims verbatim, and would be frustrated at having this apparent masterpiece denied to us. Although protracted, the film was quite a good one, and a little more logical writing (even taking into account the differing moral standards in the Britain of 1928, the blacklist scheme doesn't seem as plausible) and better pacing (Clive Brook takes forever to make minor decisions, but a victim of obviously extra-potent poison is dead within two seconds of drinking it) could have made it a much better film. In fact, the less-ambitious remake, 1935's "Without Regret" (Kent Taylor, Elissa Landi, Paul Cavanagh and Frances Drake) was quite a sturdy little film, and one that we'll get to now that we've shown the original.

STREET OF CHANCE

(Paramount, 1929) Directed by John Cromwell; Story by Oliver H.F. Garrett; adaptation by Howard Estabrook, dialogue by Lenore J. Coffee; cameraman, Charles Lang, 78 mins. (Also released in shorter silent version); NY premiere, April 15, 1929.

With: William Powell (John Marsden); Natural Davis; Jean Arthur (Judith Marsden); Kay Francis (Alma Marsden); Regis Toomey ("Babe" Marsden); Stanley Fields (Dorgan); Brooks Benedict (Al Mastick); Betty Francis (Mrs Mastick); John Risco (Tony); Joan Standing (Miss Abrams); Maurice Black (Nicky); Irving Bacon (Harry); John Cromwell (Tember) and Oscar Apfel.

What a difference a year makes! Powell is much more self-confident, and the direction (by newcomer from the stage, John Cromwell) makes the most of the rising tension of the plot and the interplay between characters. Apart from the excellent and fascinating location work in Times Square, the film also creates an effortless sense of life in the area -- the cameraderie before the big shot, employees and bum, the importance of the newsstand as a centre of extra-curricular information, a definite code of underworld honor, and so forth. It's one of the many official and unofficial cinematic revamps of the Arnold Rothstein story, but then we're much in the news. (Spencer Tracy played the same basic role in "Now I'll Tell"). It's a pity, and one you may recall from his visit to the New School to introduce "A Village Tale", one of Cromwell's personal projects, which was overaken by later and better films, but for its period it's well above the average and still a striking film. (Both films give William Powell an opening hotel scene to establish his debonair quality by the way). The 1942 film of the same title was no remake, but Paramount did remake it in 1937 as a creditable "B" under the title "Her Husband Lies" with Ricardo Cortez, Gall Patrick and Tom Brown.

--- William K. Everson

Program ends appro 10:30. No discussion period tonight, but there will be one for our final class of the season next week.