TWO ’30's MELODRAMAS FROM RKO RADIO

THIRTEEN WOMEN (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by George Archainbaud; produced by David O. Selznick; Screenplay by Bertlett Cramack from a novel by Tiffany Thayer; Music, Max Steiner; Camera, Leo Tover. NY premiere: October ’32, Roxy Theatre. 63 mins. With: Riccardo Cortez (Sgt. Clive); Irene Dunne (Laura); Myrna Loy (Ursula George); Jill Esmond (Jo); Florence Eldridge (Grace); Kay Johnson (Helen); Julie Hayden (Mary); Harriet Hayes (Kay Raskob); Mary Duncan (June Raskob); Peg Entwhistle (Hazel); Elsie Prescott (Nan); Wally Albright (Bobby); C. Henry Gordon (Swayd Yagashdi); Edward Pawley (Burns); Blanche Frederici (Teacher) and Edward LeSaint, Lloyd Ingraham.

It's hard to believe that it's 18 years since we last played tonight's two films (on consecutive weeks in December of 1973). We've had fairly constant requests to repeat "13 Women" even though in the past couple of years it has become something of a standard on the cable TV channels. Incidentally, it opened in NY at exactly the same time as another Rko Radio/Riccardo Cortez mixture of mystery and horror, "The Phantom of Crestwood". "13 Women" is something of a mystery in itself in that when originally shown to the trade press, it was some ten minutes longer than at present. Press releases while the film was in production list a number of names- Leon Ames, Kenneth Thompson, Gregory Ratoff - who ultimately do not turn up in the film at all. However, initial reviews were quite bad, and it was apparently cut (especially in the earlier sections) to speed it up. Given its plot, it makes reasonable sense, gets under way surprisingly quickly, and is far less lethargic than most Rko films of the period. It certainly isn't possible to account for all of the women of the title - even if one includes Blanche Frederici! - and presumably some of them even in the long pre-release version had but little actual footage. It's a film that is fondly remembered by many, and if you haven't seen it since 1932 the chances are that it would prove enjoyable and unhackneyed entertainment - but it's such an enjoyable and unhackneyed entertainment that it's not likely to be a major disappointment either. Considering her standing following "Olmarr", Irene Dunne's role is a surprisingly non-dominant one and Kay Johnson, seen to better advantage in our co-feature tonight, is killed off far too soon. Myrna Loy however has a grand time, especially in her climactic speech, and even manages to display some real acting talent in a role that, as written and presented, hardly calls for it. Riccardo Cortez, despite his star billing, arrives quite late in the proceedings, well into the second half - perhaps another reason for speeding up the opening. Max Steiner's score (there's more of it than in many Rkos of the period) is hardly one of his more notable ones, but it's particularly interesting in one respect. His "Kong" score was re-used (and even sold away from Rko) on many occasions, but here we have a snatch of "Kong music before the event. The unique, tense combination of notes that accompanies a shot of the train in one sequence is identical with the music used just prior to Kong's attack on the NY elevated train. Incidentally, preservation work on so-called lesser Rko films was quite sub-standard in the 50's, with tv seen as the only future outlet, and this print look like many others of its ilk is from a 35mm dup negative. Pictorial quality is a little soft and difficult to get into really sharp focus; the further back you sit, the better it will look.

--- 10 minute intermission ---

A VILLAGE TALES (Rko Radio, 1933) Directed by John Cromwell; produced by David Hempstead; Screenplay by Allan Scott from a novel by Phil Stong; Camera, Nicholas Musuraca; Music, Al Corno. 60 mins. With: Ralph Lewis, Kay Johnson, Arthur Rohl, Robert Barrat, Janet Beecher, Edward Ellis, Dorothy Burgess, Andy Clyde, Gunn Williams, Ray Mayer, T. Roy Barnes, Donald Meek, DeWitt Jennings.

Our apologies for not listing the character names in the above cast, but tonight's and the next three weeks' programs and notes also had to be put together and notes written in one evening, and it was only at the last minute that we realized that due to lack of a NY first run, there was no review or cast in the NY Times - and it was too late then to go to other sources. But anyone who isn't intimately familiar with all the names listed above should really be drummed out of the New School, with his/her copy of "Films in Review" torn asunder over the Adjunct's knees! Few companies made as many studio-bound, talkative and ultimately obscure movies as Rko in the 30's and many films deserved their obscurity as richly as "When Sinners Meet", "Captain Hurricane" and "A Girl of the Rio", to quote just three obvious titles. All the more surprise then that "A Village Tale", not well reviewed, not given a NY first-run, and virtually unmentioned when John Cromwell's career, should turn out so well. (It was one of Cromwell's own favorites however, as he commented when he introduced the film at the NY School in 1973). It's something of a 1935 "Feyton Places", very much of an anachronism in the Production Code-controlled mid-30's years, but it's more effective by far since it creates its shocks not by horror and tasteful gore, but through a whole series of reactions come as quite a jolt to audiences who associated the Phil Stong name with "State Fair", and expected more of the same. While it may even be an early noir in a sense, and one notes key noir cameraman Musuraca in charge of the cinematography, it's basically a fairly unobjectionable film. The unsympathetic characters are bitchy and narrow rather than evil, and the "good" characters often act with weakness and stupidity. Melodrama does rather take over towards the end, but we seem to be finding increasingly that life is full of melodrama. There's a whole of a fight scene, particularly notable in an early Rko film, the expected performance of grace and distinction from Kay Johnson, in an early Rko film, the expected performance of grace and distinction from Kay Johnson, and a really off-beat role for, and performance from, Donald Meek.

--- William K. Everson

Program ends 10:13; discussion follows. NOTE: NEXT 3 SHOWS START PROMPTLY AT 7:30, NO INTRO.