Through computer confusion (affecting other courses as well) a number of errors crept in to the current New School Bulletin as relating to this series. The printed schedule as issued on the program notes of our last December show is CURRENT. The errors as printed in the Bulletin are as follows: The films listed for February 18 are actually playing on March 18; the films listed for February 25 are actually playing on February 18; and the program listed for March 18 is actually playing on February 25.

THE NEW SCHOOL FILM SERIES '54 Program #1

February 4, 1954

NEWSPAPER MELODRAMAS and SCREWBALL COMEDY: Two under-rated 30's genre pieces.

THE FAMOUS FERGUSON CASE (Warner Brothers/First National, 1932) Directed by Lloyd Bacon Story and screenplay: Courttney Terrett, Harvey Thaw, Granville Moore; Camera, Dev Jennings; 74 mins. NY premiere, Warner Strand Theatre, April 1932. With : Joan Blondell (Maezie Dickson); Tom Brown (Bruce Foster); Adrienne Dore (Tony Martin); Walter Miller (Cedric Works); Grant Mitchell (Martin Collins); Kenneth Thompson (Bob Parks); Leslie Fenton (Ferrin); Vivienne Osborne (Mrs Ferguson); J. Carroll Nash (Wright); Purnell Pratt (George Ferguson); Russell Hopton (Rusty Callahan); Leon Ames (Judd Brooks); Merriam Sagar (Mrs Brooks); Willard Robertson (Sheriff); George Meeker ("Jigger" Bolton); William Burrell (Dad Sipes); Clarence Wilson (County Attorney); Russell Simpson (Craig); Bert Hanlon (Edie Kline); Mike Donlin (photographer); Willis Clark (Lindsay Jamison); Dick Curtis (O'Toole Allan Lane (reporter); Jean Lavery (Millie Moody); Spencer Charters (Fire chief); and Oscar Apfel, Fred Barton, Harry Shuman.

"The Famous Ferguson Case" is one of the most obscure of all the Yellow Journalism newspaper stories that followed in the wake of the previous year's "The Front Page" and "Five Star Final". Its lack of dynamism seems almost deliberate, in that Warners witheld a star director combination like Robinson and LeRoy, and further set it in a small town, pacing it accordingly, and using its locale as a kind of forum for a rural integrity/metropolitan corruption confrontation. If not a dynamic picture, it's a very good (and unusual one) and might well have succeeded just on the strengths of its gentler qualities with the rougher ones of its predecessors. Unfortunately, it was released within days of other high-powered melodramas, "The Wet Parade", "The Mouthpiece", "The Trial of Vivienne Ware" and "State's Attorney" among them - and not surprisingly, fell into the cracks and was very quickly forgotten. As critics of the time noted, it recalled not only two very specific murder cases but also many other more high-powered movies. Today it's rather an oddity, a pre-Code film that takes little advantage of that status, and indeed is more concerned with the abstract theme of journalistic integrity than with the "case" of the title. It was quite the most interesting of the five films that director Bacon made for Warner's that year, and almost certainly the lowest-keyed performance that Joan Blondell gave in her 12 (I) releases that year. It may not be quite what you're expecting, but it is solid, satisfying and certainly different entry in the then somewhat over-worked journalistic cycle.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

WOMAN CHASES MAN (Goldwyn-United Artists, 1937) Directed by John Hystone; Produced by Sam Goldwyn; Screenplay (see notes below): Joseph Anthony, Manny Senn, David Hertz, Dorothy Parker, Alan Campbell and Joe Bigelow from a story by Wells Root and Frank Fenton; Camera, Gregg Toland; Music, Alfred Newman; 71 mins; NY premiere, Radio City Music Hall, June 1937.

With: Miriam Hopkins (Virginia Travis); Joel McCrea (Kenneth Nolan); Charles Winninger (R.J. Nolan); Erik Rhodes (Henri Saffron); Ella Logan (Judy Williams); Leona Ramicie (Mina Tennyson); Frederick Crawford (Hunk Williams); Charles Halton (Mr. Judd); Roger Gray (Window washer); George Chandler (Taxi driver); William Jaffrey (Doctor); Frances Gifford (Secretary); Alan Bridge, Monty Vanigfield, Jack Axley, Walter Soderling (process servers); A.E. Hall, Dick Cramer (men in subway).

The last of five McCrea-Hopkins vehicles for Goldwyn, "Woman Chases Man" is by far the best (apart from the 40's "Hall of Fire") of Goldwyn's infrequent forays into Screwball Comedy. Yet it has always had a reputation as a misfire, and is rarely shown these days. So far as I am aware it has had no New York exposure on tv or in revival houses for some seven or eight years, and the lack of appreciation for such a delightful comedy (the similar but much inferior "The Richest Girl in the World" of 1934 also with McCrea and Hopkins, is more highly regarded) is hard to understand. Apparently it started life as a back-stage comedy, was written by Bella and Samuel Spewack, then worked on by Ben Hecht, and finally passed through the hands of many writers, only some of whom are credited. Early in its life it earned the reputation of being a "hard luck" picture. William Wyler, who was to direct, even returned a substantial bonus (earned on previous pictures) in order to be relieved of the assignment. Several stars, including Goldwyn newcomer Andrea Leeds, turned it down. While such an Odyssey would not be unusual at MGM, it was unusual for the independent Goldwyn. The final script apparently bore no resemblance to the original concept at all. Too many cooks and too much burning usually spell trouble, but in this case all the rewrites are seamless. Although written for stars, comedies usually show it, as the current "I'll Do Anything" apparently does, but not so with "Woman Chases Man". Even its "evidence" of production problems is purely circumstantial. At 71 minutes it would seem to be too short (especially as late as 1937) for an "A" production. Yet Goldwyn was one of the few producers never to equate length with quality; in 1930, with Ronald Colman at the top of the heap as a new star of talkies, "The Devil to Pay" likewise ran only 71 minutes.

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"Woman Chases Man" tells its story so admirably in its less than seven reel length that the only cause for suspicion is the credit to John Huston as director. Essentially he was a rough-house director; he had done Cagney's "Great Guy" the year before and would follow "Woman Chases Man" with Laurel & Hardy's "Swiss Miss". The elegance and sophistication of "Woman Chases Man", so alien to his normal style, leads one to ponder that possibly he was the last director brought in, and that one of his functions was to emulate, limit and finish the work of others. If so, then he did his job amazingly well.

Contemporary criticisms that it strained too hard for laughs and featured unsympathetic male protagonists in Joel McCrea as the millionaire and Charles Winninger as his conniving father just don't hold water today. Indeed, it is the unsterotypical characterisations that keep it looking so much fresher than many other mid-30's screwball farces. Miriam Hopkins (very much of an acquired taste, but this is quite one of her best comedy performances) plays a designer whose ambitions have been frustrated because of sex discrimination, the role providing added feminist topicality today. Curiously, her role is a sort of compression of the Colbert/McCrea roles in "The Palm Beach Story", while McCrea can be seen as a slightly more colorful forerunner of Rudy Vallee in that later classic. At a time when he had not yet had many opportunities to develop a comic persona, McCrea plays his dull, all-business hero with a neatly underplayed sense of humor, helped and punctuated by the occasional devastating one-liner. Presumably it is to Dorothy Parker's portion of the script that we must be grateful for the explanation of Charles Winninger's mind that "he was born in Maine and weaned in Vermont". Winninger isn't particularly endearing as the grasping father, but the role makes a nice contrast with his cherubic face and he plays it well. In fact he repeated the role virtually verbatim in the 1947 Deanna Durbin comedy "Something in the Wind". Gruff, hearty Eugene Pallette may have been a more welcome Permanent Head of the Screwball Family, but Winninger makes an interesting change of pace. One might also note the energetic uncouth humor of Broderick Crawford in a supporting role; he was too little used at this early stage of his career, when his crudeness had more comic spontaneity.

If Goldwyn had any doubts about the film, he certainly didn't show it in the care and expense of the production trappings; music, cinematography and art direction are all top drawer, with elegance and gloss exuding from every frame.

--- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:16.
Discussion/Questions follow.