

An Ernst Lubitsch Program

LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN (Warner Bros., 1925) Adapted from the Oscar Wilde play by Julian Josephson; with Ronald Colman, Bert Lytell, May McAvoy, Irene Rich. 6 reels.

Not seen in NY for several years, we've had many requests for this rather strange Lubitsch film -- "strange" because it takes so few advantages of Wilde's witty language, uses it hardly at all in the subtitles, and thus renders an already stagey work a further stumbling block. Not that Ernst Lubitsch fails to add touches of his own -- some of the visual gags are quite delightful -- but they are rather infrequent. Admittedly, even in sound films, Wilde's comedies of manners and morals rarely came off -- certainly the talkie "Lady Windermere's Fan" didn't. "The Picture of Dorian Gray" apart, they all seemed too self-consciously approached, too inadequately played. How well, one feels, Ronald Colman could have played this had he the benefit of sound to help him. Nevertheless, despite its slowness, it's a handsome and enjoyable show, and played well by a fine cast of movie aristocrats.

BLUEBEARD'S EIGHTH WIFE (Paramount, 1938) Screenplay by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett, from the play by Alfred Savoir; camera, Leo Tover; music, Werner Heymann. Starring Gary Cooper and Claudette Colbert, with Edward Everett Horton, David Niven, Elizabeth Patterson, Herman Bing, Warren Hymer, Franklin Pangborn, Lawrence Grant, Tom Ricketts, Barlowe Borland, Charles Halton. 9 reels.

The notes appended below were written on the occasion of our first showing of this film, to a very small audience, over five years ago. Apart from pointing out that subsequent comedies (especially "Love in the Afternoon") have quite lost this gay spirit, and that the years have proven Billy Wilder to be quite the more dominant of the Wilder-Brackett team, there is little we need add to them .....

"Bluebeard's 8th Wife", originally a stage vehicle for Ina Claire in 1921, and two years later screen material for Gloria Swanson under Sam Wood's direction, represents very much of a turning point in Lubitsch's career. In many ways, it was the end of the old Lubitsch, of breezy sex farces in Paris and Monte Carlo. It was his last film for Paramount, and while it was a long way below the standard of the best Chevaliers and especially the wonderful "Trouble in Paradise", it still retained much of their flavor and certainly their delightful use of incidental music. Admitting that it is not top-grade Lubitsch, it was nevertheless better than almost anything that followed. What happens to people who leave Paramount and go to work for Metro? The Marx Brothers lost ninety percent of their vitality when they made the move. And Lubitsch himself, transferring Chevalier, Horton, MacDonald, Bing and co. over to MGM in 1934 succeeded in making "The Merry Widow" a very stodgy affair. Back at Paramount, he resumed his former style, only to lose it again at Metro with "Ninotchka". (Enjoyable though it was, its merits were those of performance and writing rather than of direction, & though he had good films ahead of him, Lubitsch was never to regain the charm and frolicsome spirits of his Paramounts). A slick film in every way, with some wonderful trouping from Horton, Bing and others of the Lubitsch stock company, "Bluebeard" dates only in its over-obvious use of back projection. (By the way, Ted Huff once pointed out that Sacha Guitay may be seen emerging from a Vienna hotel in these process shots!) It was this film that established the writing (and later writing-producing-directing) team of Brackett and Wilder. They followed up with "Midnight" and of course "Ninotchka", which really launched their careers with a vengeance