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"BLUEBEARD'S EIGHTH WIFE" (Paramount, 1937; rel: 1993) Dir: Ernst Lubitsch
Screenplay by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett, from the play
by Alfred Savoir; camera: Leo Tover; music: Werner Heymann; 9 rls.
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.

"Bluebeard's 8th Wife" was by no means the only Wilder film omitted from the Museum of Modern Art's recent Billy Wilder cycle, but it was the only major film that should have been there, and was not deleted merely because Wilder disliked it (as presumably was the case with "The Emperor Waltz") or because Wilder's script contribution was of a purely routine nature (as with "Rhythm on the River" and other films). Paramount's story-rights have expired, and the official story is that no prints have been preserved in this country, and that the only preservation material has been sent to Europe to the present copyright holders. Surprisingly, this kind of story is often quite true, so our print tonight may well be the only one extant in this country. Regardless of whether it is or not, the film is not available for theatrical or tv showing, so we're glad to be able to close a major gap in a cycle of films that we know most of you have been following.

"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, is both a turning point in Lubitsch's career and a milestone in screen comedy. 1938 saw the last of the gay and crazy comedies of the 30's: "The Rage of Paris" and "Bluebeard's 8th Wife" were the tail end of a delightful genre that had flourished between 1932 and 1934, had been given new impetus in 36 with "My Man Godfrey", retained its drive in 37 with "Nothing Sacred" and "It's Love It's After" and now, in 1938, was beginning to lose steam. Preston Sturges still lay ahead of course, but he was a lone oasis to make up for the diminishing comedy activities of Lubitsch, Wellman, Del Ruth, LaCava and Hawks. 1939 did have Brackett and Wilder's "Midnight" -- but how it needed (and lacked) a Lubitsch. It got by very entertainingly on its script and on its marvellous cast, so that one could overlook its lack of directorial style, but what a comedy it could have been with Lubitsch at the helm! (When it was remade some years later as "Masquerade in Mexico" it had neither script nor cast to give it an assist, and became a ponderous time-wasting bore).

In many ways, "Bluebeard's 8th Wife" is the last of the vintage Lubitsch, of breezy sex farce in Paris and Monte Carlo. It was his last film for Paramount, and while it may not have been up to the standard of "Trouble in Paradise", it was still so much better than "Angel" or "Design for Living" that it hardly represented a decline. Elegant from first scene to last, beautifully written and played, flawlessly constructed so that Messrs. Pangbourn, Bing et al all had their little highlights, and with a charmingly spirited score, it's the kind of tasteful froth that seemed to belong so much to the pre-war years -- and that we've just never been able to recapture. If we've tried -- and certainly Wilder did try, in "Love in the Afternoon" and other films -- the results have always been unconvincing and heavy-handed.

We've often commented before on the deadening effect an exit from Paramount has had on many directors and players -- Lubitsch and the Marx Brothers in particular. Even with his Paramount stock company, Lubitsch couldn't retain his champagne touch when he went to MGM in 34 to do "The Merry Widow". Back he came to Paramount, and his style returned. Then, after "Bluebeard", he returned to MGM, and the same thing happened with "Ninotchka" -- an enjoyable but grossly over-rated film, the merits of which were the performances and the script (Brackett and Wilder again) and only lastly its now much heavier direction. Certainly, as a comedy, "Ninotchka" is a colossal step down from "Bluebeard's 8th Wife" which remains a delightful and careful study in comedy. Indeed, it takes only one look at the film to see that it is a comedy, and that it has some academic value. It is a comedy, and it is a comedy, and it is a comedy. It may be seen emerging from a Vienna hotel in these process shots!

Wa. K. Eversen

The March-May schedules will be mailed in about ten days. Hopefully the programs will include the still missing "Last of the Pagans". Other films will be "Safety Last" with Lloyd, "The Primitive Lover" with Constance Talmadge, "Shifting Sands" with Gloria Swanson, "The Invisible Ray" (Karloff-Lugosi), "Evergreen" (Jessie Matthews), a Wheeler & Wolsey program, "Friends and Lovers" with Erich von Stroheim, Laurence Olivier, Adolphe Menjou, and sundry others, plus of course the delayed but definite "Dr. Mabius".