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SOAP OPERAS WITH STYLE

(See: PICK UP)

Tonight's program is a good example of how two films, both basically unimportant but both very enjoyable, that on their own might seem somewhat trivial, as a unit gravitate together and complement one another rather nicely. Apart from both being from the same genre, and vehicles for notable feminine stars, both are also produced by B.P. Schulberg (who seemed to shuttle back and forth between Columbia and Paramount) and both are directed by Marion Gering, whose relatively brief career in the 30's included such films as "The Devil and the Deep" and "Thunder in the City" - as well as a half-dozen Sylvia Sidney vehicles.

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LADY OF SECRETS (Columbia, 1936) Directed by Marion Gering; Produced by B.P. Schulberg; Screenplay by Zoe Akins and Joseph Anthony from an original story by Katherine Bush; Camera: Ted Tetzlaff; 75 mins.
With Ruth Chatterton, Otto Kruger, Lionel Atwill, Marian Marsh, Lloyd Nolan, Robert Allen, Elisabeth Risdon, Nana Bryant, Esther Dale.

Classy soap-operas and "confession" movies had been enormously popular at RKO, Warners and Paramount in the early 30's and then went out of fashion. Columbia seemed to take them over in the mid-30's, shaping them into vehicles for new stars (Jean Arthur), veterans (Ruth Chatterton) and their own resident Emil Jannings, Walter Connolly (as witness "Whom the Gods Destroy"). But these were all post-Code films, and moral strayings of any kind had to be paid for with a plethora of suffering. Not being able to deal entirely honestly with the subjects at hand, they sometimes went overboard with sentiment or melodramatic excesses, accusations that can be levelled at "Lady of Secrets". One has to wait until the middle of the film for the "confession" element to intrude, and then it is handled quite discreetly. But for a relatively minor film, it's handsomely made, excellently photographed by Ted Tetzlaff, who would become a fine director of thrillers in the 40's, and well served by a particularly strong cast. Not the least bit dismayed at not being cast as a mad scientist, Atwill turns his pompous father into the tyrant of all time, making even Laughton's performance in "The Barretts of Wimpole Street" seem quite benevolent by comparison. Atwill makes the most of every line and facial nuance, and is a joy to watch. Ruth Chatterton, nearing the end of her career (she made some 20-odd films between 1929 and 1933, only a half-dozen between 1934 and 1938) shows no signs of considering herself slumming after years of greater glory at Paramount and Warners, and gives her usual solid if sometimes mannered performance, faring rather better as the more mature woman in the bulk of the story, and not looking too convincing as the younger girl in the flashback sequence.