The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

NO. 118
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

REDISCOVERING RKO IS MODERN'S FIVE MONTH COMPREHENSIVE RETROSPECTIVE DEVOTED TO THE RICH BUT 'UNKNOWN' CINEMA OF RKO

A major five-month-long retrospective of the films of RKO Radio Pictures will open at The Museum of Modern Art on December 21 and continue through May 14, 1979. Some 135 films spanning the years 1928 through 1958 will be screened, some of them for the first time since their initial release. Unlike the other studios, RKO Radio Pictures was formed only with the coming of sound, and from its inception in 1928 it allowed its creative personnel a wider range of opportunities for expression and experimentation than did its more affluent competitors. Over 700 films were made at RKO between 1928 and 1958 (the year in which the studio ceased production), and today many of these films are being rediscovered. Film historians and scholars are beginning to examine what has become the "unknown" RKO, and from the considerable wealth of material now being made available by RKO General Pictures, are finding many films of unusual interest, and some that may be considered masterworks themselves.

Organized by Adrienne Mancia, Curator in the Department of Film, and Larry Kardish, Associate Curator, the MOMA retrospective is designed to bring attention to forgotten and seldom revived works. It begins on December 21 with the once-popular "Rio Rita," and Nicholas Ray's more celebrated than seen "The Lusty Men," and includes films that are frequently referred to but hardly screened such as the Academy Award winning "Cimarron" and the Bette Davis "Of Human Bondage." It also focuses attention on lesser-known but equally interesting and rich films such as Garson Kanin's "The Great Man Votes" and Boris Ingster's "The Stranger on the Third Floor."

The evolution of RKO is unique: involved are names like Joseph P. Kennedy of F.B.O., an early '20s film production company; David Sarnoff of R.C.A. Radio pictures; the Keith Albee theatre chain; and the Pathé Newsreel and Studios. Notwithstanding this amalgam of forces, the company suffered more financial reverses than any other major studio and, eventually, was acquired by Howard Hughes, who sold it to General Tire, of which it is a film distributing company today.

The men in charge of making Radio Pictures suffered from the constant turnover at the top levels of the corporation; and unlike other studios, RKO had no set style of production philosophy. As a result, the films produced during RKO's thirty-year history are among the most heterogeneous and eclectic group of films ever made. It was because of its newness, its lack of an entrenched bureaucracy, and its freedom from established tradition that RKO Radio Pictures showed a more adventurous spirit than any of its competitors. This was evidenced by the talented young staff, both technical and creative, that dominated the studio during its thirty years. The reputations of many of the industry's later greats were established by their early work at RKO. Producers like David O. Selznick, Merian C. Cooper, Pandro S. Berman, Val Lewton, and Dore Schary gave the RKO films a distinctive style and intelligence, and in the process set new standards for industry excellence. Performers such as Irene Dunne, Constance Bennett, Ginger Rogers, Cary Grant, Lucille Ball, Robert Mitchum, Charles Laughton, Rosalind Russell, Bette Davis, Robert Ryan, John Wayne, and of course Joan Fontaine all did some of their best early work at RKO.

Because RKO served as a training ground and allowed considerable freedom of expression, Nicholas Ray was able to make "The Lusty Men," a story of rodeo people and their lonely world by Horace McCoy, who was at that time

writing his classic "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" Other Ray films on the program are "They Live by Night" and "Born to be Bad."

"Clash by Night," in which Marilyn Monroe makes one of her earliest appearances, was directed at RKO by Fritz Lang from a Clifford Odets play of delicately balanced relationships. It is but one of several underrated films included in the Museum's survey, as is Lang's unrecognized masterpiece from his American period, "While the City Sleeps," the director's own favorite.

The first of John Frankenheimer's films, a fictionalized documentary, "The Young Stranger," also appears, along with Jean Renoir's first film in America, "This Land Is Mine," with Charles Laughton as a timid schoolteacher submitting to Nazi tyranny because he refuses to fight.

Val Lewton was given the opportunity to produce a number of extremely low budget films. With that mandate he created a series of films that expanded and enriched the idea of the "supernatural" film by giving these works a firm psychological base. His productions of "The Ghost Ship" and "The Seventh Victim," both directed by the young Mark Robson, are two of the moody and suspenseful works that are also included in this series.

Of equal importance was the roster of RKO writers, which included Dalton Trumbo, Norman Corwin, Leonard Spigelglass, Stephen Vincent Benet, Morrie Ryskind, Garson Kanin, Allen Rivkin, Dudley Nichols, Frank Nugent and Samson Raphaelson, Samuel and Bella Spewack, Nathaniel West, and William Faulkner.

RKO's technical department excelled. Van Nest Polglase's art direction was world famous. The special effects and trick processes, particularly under the guidance of Linwood Dunn, were some of the most accomplished in Hollywood. Musical scores by Alfred Newman, Max Steiner and Dimitri Tiomkin became exemplary, and set standards for the filmmaking community. Cinematographers like Gregg Toland, Nicholas Musuraca, Joseph August and Ted

Tetzlaff all created stunning black-and-white and color images that not only still spring from the screen with impact but are being copied today.

On the program are many noteworthy items: Dorothy Arzner, an early woman director, is represented by "Christopher Strong," starring Katharine Hepburn; and well-known actress Ida Lupino takes a director's credit on three films, "Outrage," "Hard, Fast and Beautiful" and "The Hitch-Hiker." From the theatre came Harold Clurman, whose only film, "Deadline at Dawn," was written by Clifford Odets. Odets is also featured in this series as a director for "None but the Lonely Heart" in which Cary Grant plays "the tramp of the universe" opposite Ethel Barrymore. Otto Preminger contributed "Angel Face," starring Robert Mitchum, who appears in five films in this cycle--which also includes three versions of George M. Cohan's play "Seven Keys to Baldpate," made in 1935, '39, and '47, all by different directors, with different stars, and all to be shown on February 1.

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers appear in REDISCOVERING RKO--but not together. Fred Astaire is partnered with Joan Leslie in what must be the first film noir musical in "The Sky's the Limit," and Ginger Rogers' lucky partner in "Lucky Partners" is Ronald Colman. Not only does Frank Sinatra appear in his first starring 'vehicle,' "Higher and Higher," but in it he appears opposite the French actress Michele Morgan.

Of RKO's directors, John Cromwell (with almost a dozen features), Gregory LaCava, Nicholas Ray, George Cukor, Jacques Tourneur, Garson Kanin, and Edward Dmytryk, whose "Hitler's Children" was a timely phenomenon at the box office, appear most frequently on the program. Other distinctive directorial efforts include: "The Sin Ship" by Louis Wolheim, an actor, who directed himself opposite Mary Astor; Clyde Beatty's famous jungle picture with Frank Buck, "Bring 'Em Back Alive," and "Mighty Joe Young," a footnote to "King Kong," by the same director, Ernest Schoedsack; and

"Friends and Lovers," made in 1931 by Victor Schertzinger, boasting a most unusual cast with Laurence Olivier, Adolphe Menjou, Lili Damita, and Erich von Stroheim.

All of these talents combined at the RKO Studio, which served as a catalyst, to explore and mirror the changing tastes and preoccupations of the American audience. The cinematic fluency, visual invention, and nervous vitality of these pictures anticipated much of what is in present American cinema.

An exhibition of 31 stills from the films in REDISCOVERING RKO, designed by Mary Corliss, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Film, and Patrick Cunningham, Graphics Manager, from December 14 through May 1, 1979 in the Auditorium Gallery.

December 1978

For further information, please contact Lillian Gerard, Special Projects Coordinator (212) 956-7296 or Kent Wittrup (212) 956-7501, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019.
Photographs and schedule available on request.