"ROXIE HART" (20th Century Fox, 1942) Directed by William A. Wellman written and produced by Nunnally Johnson, from the play "Chicago" by Maurine Watkins; camera; Leon Shamroy; designs by Herschel Haub; musical; Alfred Newman; edited by James B. Clark.

With Ginger Rogers, George Montgomery, Adolphe Menjou, Lynne Overman, Niel Bruce, Phil Silvers, Sara Allgood, William Frawley, Spring Byington, Ted North, Helene Reynolds, Iris Adrian, George Chandler 74 Mins.

It comes as rather a shock to realise that "Roxie Hart" was made far closer to the roaring twenties it depicted than we are to the rather clumsish forties that produced "Roxie Hart"? At the time rather cut above by the subtler satires that Preston Sturges was doing at Paramount, "Roxie Hart" seemed amusing enough but no more. Yet in retrospect it seems quite one of the best comedies of the 40's, with a zest, crackle and bravado that has quite vanished today. It is not as successful a satire as Wellman's earlier "Nothing Sacred", which played its satire straight and with irony. "Roxie Hart" tries for laughs -- and it certainly gets them -- but its approach is broader and more obvious. And, like "Broadway" (another 1929 film made in the early 40's) it wraps it all up in nastiness by making the whole story a flashback. It takes longer to get off the round, and it slows down occasionally to remind you it's all a flashback. But while the remake of "Broadway" pulled all its punches and made sure that everybody abided by the Code, "Roxie Hart" does retain the authentic spirit of the original "Chicago", though Ginger Rogers hardly has quite the same appeal that Phyllis Haver had. Adolphe Menjou, in a role that Barrymore would have done brilliantly in the 30's, has some subtle lines to which he does full justice, and people like Lynne Overman and Niel Bruce remind us how rich Hollywood used to be in character actors -- and how sparse that field is becoming today.

"I'M NO ANGEL" (Paramount, 1933) Directors: Wesley Ruggles; Story and Dialogue by Mae West, with suggestions by Lowell Bentson; Camera: Leo Tover; Editor: Otto Lovering.


Whereas the Code-supervised "Roxie Hart" had as its heroine a good girl trying to look bad, this pre-Code film makes no bones about its heroine being a bad girl on the make! One of the best dialogues of the Mae West vehicles, it's also one of the best: "She Done Him Wrong" topped it, but later, when they toned her down, and removed the outrage, her appeal was neutralized. In "I'm No Angel" she's at her best -- roaring seductively, and living out with the most outrageous double-entendres. As a comedy, however, it falls below the standard of the more inhibited "Roxie Hart" -- thanks solely to Miss West's determination that she be the whole show. Apart from one funny line tossed like a bone to Edward Arnold, no-one else has ANYTHING funny to do or say. Fine comedians like Arnold and Ratoff are just shuffled in and out of scenes as they are needed. Apparently reluctant to let him think he was her leading man, she has Cary Grant coddle his heels, making his first appearance quite casually well into the second half. And the climactic court-room scene which could well have been funnier than the parallel scene in "Roxie Hart", is far lesser so because, a-la Mae, nobody but Miss West is allowed to be funny.

And since plot takes over from situation in the second half of the film, this latter-half is far slower-paced than the first. But with Mae's torrid boudoir scenes (accompanying by sleazy jazz) and her songs, who can honestly complain about her ego -- even when one reads in her book how she INSISTED on working, ALL THE LIONS without a double, and then finds here that except for one quick shot with a toothless old beast, it's ALL done with back projection, doubles and matte.