TWO COMEDIES: LUBITSCH and STURGES

"THE PALM BEACH STORY" (Paramount, 1942) Written and directed by Preston Sturges; Associate Producer - Paul Jones; Photographed by Victor Milner; music by Victor Young; Art Direction - Ernst Fegté and Hans Dreier; Nine reels.

While the depression-based "Design for Living" concerns itself (partially) with the struggle for success and the importance of money, "The Palm Beach Story", made when the dismal thirties had optimistically turned themselves into the prosperous forties, gives us poor people who care little for success and millionaires who are bored by bank accounts. And while Lubitsch, ever one to break a convention, offered us illicit and unmarried lovers trying to make "convenient" arrangements, Sturges, too unconcerned about conventions even to worry about breaking them, has his protagonists properly married, but seeking "convenient" divorces and re-marriages. Both are off-beat Cinderella tales that refuse to take themselves seriously, but Sturges' film, being itself almost a parody of the whole decade of happy-ending rags-to-riches fairy tales that had preceded it, comes off the better of the two.

Sturges' films, like Chaplin's, have a way of changing their values with the years. When it came out, "The Palm Beach Story" was regarded as another slick Sturges success, but it hardly seemed one of his best. Eight years later (at least, in Europe) the Sturges Cult re-discovered it and hailed it as one of his greatest. Its slick superficiality and fast, sophisticated dialogue did make it seem a lot better in 1950, when comedy and wit had all but disappeared from the screen. Seen today, it seems that perhaps the first impressions were right after all - it is slick and consistently amusing, but it is also unavoidably shallow. (How I wonder, would "Hail the Conquering Hero" seem today? Apart from being the noisiest and most ear-blasting comedy of all time, it also seemed one of the most over-rated).

"The Palm Beach Story", lacking the warmth of "Christmas in July" and "Sullivan's Travels", still has most of the expected Sturges ingredients, most notably the amazingly deft dovetailing of slapstick and satire, clever lines and violent pratfalls. Victor Young's score, its mood presumably suggested by Sturges, follows the same pattern, using musical cliches (ranging from Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet" to Rodgers and Hart's "Isn't It Romantic?")) in effectively satirical style. But while each of the elements is often handled perfectly (Vallee's idiotic patter is often marvellously sophisticated cinema, and the whole episode of the Ale and Quail Club a gem of chaotic slapstick) the balance of the two sometimes leaves a little to be desired, Sturges, like John Ford, too often inserts a bit of low comedy at just the wrong place, or lets a serious scene get completely out of hand. The long bedroom discussion between McCrea and Colbert at the beginning of the film dawdles on aimlessly and endlessly, and gets the film nowhere. In such scenes, the film curiously seems much older than it is; at other times, it seems so up to date that it could almost be taken as a parody of "La Notte". In any event, with all its flaws (and it's such an "audience" picture that those flaws seem really apparent only when one screens the film alone) it remains a thorough delight. All of Sturges' old cronies are on hand; Rudy Vallee, who gets all the best dialogue and who was off to a whole new
comedy career as a result of his role here, creates a wonderful caricature, and Claudette Colbert is so very beautiful and so very much at her peak as a comedienne, that one wishes that she, rather than Miriam Hopkins, had had the feminine lead in "Design for Living".

**DESIGN FOR LIVING** (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch; adapted by Ben Hecht from the play by Noel Coward; photographed by Victor Milner; edited by Francis Marsh. Nine reels.

With Gary Cooper, Fredric March, Miriam Hopkins, Edward Everett Horton, Franklyn Pangburne, Isabel Jewell, Mary Gordon, Olaf Hytten

"Design for Living" is one of those films that everybody remembers with fond, but vague, affection, and that is almost never referred to any more in writings on the cinema. But it is not too hard to understand why it has never been offered for critical re-appraisal or commercial reissue, for it turns out to be unquestionably the weakest Lubitsch film from his best period. If only to fill in this gap and set the record straight, it is certainly worth our revival - and it is in any case, an entertaining film - but it is hard to understand just WHAT went wrong. The production value is there. From the careful camerawork, the lavishness of the sets and the little "bits of business", it is obvious that this isn't a film that Lubitsch dashed off without time or care. But so much doesn't jell; Miriam Hopkins never once approaches the brilliance of her performance in "Trouble in Paradise". Cooper is too patently type-cast, and unable to hold his own; and March, suave, polished, on top form, is seldom rewarded with a good line of dialogue. Indeed, some of his lengthy scenes with Cooper - and especially a tedious drunk scene - just eat up footage and nothing else. But dear old Edward Everett Horton makes his every scene a joy, and it's good to see that he was rewarded with equal star billing. Perhaps the real fault lies with Ben Hecht, who seems content to retain Noel Coward's story-line but not his style. What should have been an outrageously audacious sex frolic becomes a rather tasteless farce, which has the guts not to pull its punches, but lacks the wit to do anything about it.

This is not to say that "Design for Living" is unfunny. There are some wonderful moments. Horton's pantomime as he buys a double-bed is superb. Hopkins gets off some choice lines which would hardly pass muster today, such as telling a prissy Franklyn Pangburne that he'll like a new play because "It's a woman's play", or protesting that she's tired of playing "Going to Jerusalem" with a Jewish manufacturer. But lines and scenes like these are easily remembered because they are spaced so far apart that they become highlights. "Trouble in Paradise", only a year earlier, had been such a wonderfully sophisticated comedy that it was completely devoid of highlights, and scenes like these were just lost in the shuffle.

Perhaps "Design for Living" disappoints because one expects so much from such a star-director-writer combination. Forewarned, you may consider these notes a trifle unfair. But at least, one more gap from the thirties has been closed! Incidentally, there are two very annoying cuts in this print - annoying mainly because they are so obvious, and so unnecessary, and because they add to the confusion of an already somewhat incoherent screenplay. One cut occurs about 20 minutes in; the other, about 10 minutes from the end. They are not cuts of censorable material, but appear to be commercial break cuts. With a break in between, they would not be so apparent, and some television station presumably gained about five minutes of time in making them. In the first case, the end of a scene is gone; in the second, the beginning of a scene. Not too much damage is done, but it's jarring none the less, and is one more strike against this rather unfortunate film, which has as its greatest flaw the fact that it so obviously thinks it is being terribly clever and terribly adult when actually, Mr. Horton apart, it is mainly being quite dull...Wm. K. Everson