"THE GREEKS HAD A WORD FOR THEM" (Sam Goldwyn-United Artists, 1932)
Directed by Lowell Sherman; photographed by George Barnes;
adapted by Sidney Howard from the play by Zoe Akins;
music by Alfred Newman; edited by Stuart Heisler; art
direction by Richard Day; 9 reels
With Ina Claire, Madge Evans, Joan Blondell, Lowell Sherman, David
Manners, Sidney Bracey, Phillips Smalley, Creighton Hale, Ward Bond.

A faced-paced comedy of three girls on the prowl (it was one of the key
sources from which the Fox trio "Moon Over Miami", "Three Little Girls in
Blue" and "How to Marry a Millionaire" sprang), "The Greeks Had a Word
For Them" was produced in 1931, and released the following year. It's
typical Cinderella-depression fare, cynical enough to present its three
heroines as amoral gold-diggers, yet sufficiently aware of basic public
appeal to have the most attractive of the three girls reform, although
still permitting her to land her millionaire!

It literally oozes the spirit of the early 30's -- partly as they really
were, and wholly as the movies of the period had us believe they were --
in its brittle and zippy comments on manners and morals, its careful
reconstructions of smoky speakeasies, and in its very much authentically
in period dialogue. "Let's all have a little drinky" is one of the most
oft-repeated phrases.

The film doesn't make too conspicuous an attempt to conceal its stage
origin, but frequent changes of venue, slick editing, and some nice
swinging crane shots from cameraman George Barnes -- plus an effective
and ironic use of the iris-out device -- keeps the whole frolic nicely
and filmically on the move. A very much shortened and censored version
has been shown on television somewhat infrequently, usually under the
title "Three Broadway Girls"; our print we're happy to say is both in
fine condition and complete.

Lowell Sherman reminds us once again what a polished performer he was --
and what an accomplished director of sex comedy, whether it be
sophisticated fare, as in today's film, or the cut-and-cout hawdy faree
of Mae West's "She Done Him Wrong". And after rhapsodising over the
charm and loveliness of Madge Evans in "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" just a few
weeks ago, we'll just add that she's equally delectable here. Jean Blondell
too, is at her snappy, lingerie-clad, early 30's best!

Incidentally, if you listen to the background music carefully, you'll
recognise matches from the scores of "Whoopie" and "Reaching for the
Moon" -- and some of the decor in Lowell Sherman's apartment turned up
the following year in Madge Evans' apartment in "Hallelujah I'm a Bum".
(Richard Day was the art-director on both pictures).

-INTERMISSION-
“BLESSED EVENT” (Warner Brothers, 1932) Directed by Roy Del Ruth
Scenario by Howard Green, from the play of the same title by Manuel Seff and Forrest Wilson; photographed by Sol Polito; art director, Robert Haas; edited by James Gibson; 9 reels.


Another stage derivation, "Blessed Event" betrays its origin even less than "The Greeks Had a Word For Them". Like Milestone's version of the Recht-MacArthur "The Front Page", it has such dynamic pacing that one quite forget that many of its key scenes are extremely lengthy and that changes of venue are limited. One never quite forgets that dialogue dominates -- but what dialogue! The opening, establishing sequences are a trifle slow, with the gags evenly spaced, but this merely serves to emphasize the crackling pace which builds and builds, increasing without let-up.

"Blessed Event" is one of the best and most under-rated of all the high-pressure, totally irreverent comedies of the early 30's. As in the best of them, nothing is sacred. The film is basically - and quite obviously - a shrewd and justifiably vicious satire of Walter Winchell, and as such is as potent today as it was then (which is more than one can say of Winchell himself?) But in the process of lampooning Winchell and radio and newspaper commentators, it also manages to aim a few telling pot-shots at crooks, pawns, Jews, Negroes and sundry other minority groups. Movies used to be so much fun when comedy itself was "integrated" and no one racial group or minority group could complain because they were too busy laughing at a gag about a Chinese laundryman or a Greek barber! Now, nobody makes jokes about them - everybody complains - and nobody gets any laughs, least of all the minority groups.

However, such gags form only a small part of the tabus that are recklessly tossed aside in "Blessed Event". Tabus, that is, by today's standards. There is some caustic - and hilarious - comment on police brutality, and a delightfully "black" episode wherein Lee Tracy describes a grisly electrocution in infinite detail. This is not only a high-powered comedy scene, but a reminder of those crescendo-building rapid-fire dialogue scenes that formed so much a part of theatre - and the movies - in the early 30's. Robinson had such a scene - and a great one - in "The Star Final"; Pat O'Brien another one in "The Front Page". (And incidentally, O'Brien showed that he still had the old dynamism when he did such a scene on the NY stage again just a few years ago in "Miss Lonelyhearts"). Tracy had made a few films prior to "Blessed Event", but it was his brilliant performance here which really established him as a top-liner (though not, alas, for long).

"Blessed Event" rolls along merrily, always coming up with the unexpected. A charming old lady suddenly remarks "Well I'll be damned!"; Dick Powell sings a marvellous parody of commercials ("Ten little fingers may do as they please, but ten little toes need Shapiro Shoes!"); all of the old Warner stock companies of hoods, reporters and sub-sisters trot happily across the screen; and even allowing for a top script and for Lee Tracy, one is inclined to look on Roy Del Ruth with an entirely new respect after the exhilarating 63 minutes of "Blessed Event".

--NEXT WEEK--
Next Sunday: New Yorker, 9:30 A.M. "CHANCE IT" (1921) with Clara Kimball Young, Herbert Rawlinson; and shorts.
Next Tuesday: "Leatherneck" (1929) with Wm. Boyd, Fred Kohler; & shorts.