Tuesday Next, November 24th: Two sophisticated comedies from the mid-20's: Monta Bell's "The King on Main Street" with Adolphe Menjou and Bessie Love; Mal St. Clair's "Are Parents People?" with Betty Bronson, Menjou, Florence Vidor.

Tuesday Dec. 8th: Two melodramas from the thirties: William Wellman's "Looking for Trouble" (1933) with Spencer Tracy, Constance Cummings, Jack Oakie; and "The Ace of Aces" (1933) with Richard Dix, Elizabeth Allan, Ralph Bellamy.

November 17, 1964

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Films by Tay Garnett

If we were 42nd Street showmen, we'd probably bill tonight's program as "two sea spectacles on one bill", and reminded you that Garnett also made "China Seas", the Cagney-Harlow-Deary melodrama that was one of the more enjoyable frolics of the mid-30's. We're exponents of the "auteur" theory, we'd probably point to the similar use of a bar-room singing trio in both of tonight's films as proof absolute that a director has complete control over what goes into, and what emerges from, his films. But since we fall into neither group, we'll just content ourselves with the remark that tonight's two films -- one a tender romance, the other a full-blooded adventure -- merely testify to the all-around versaility of Garnett, who, along with Curtiz, Seiter, LeRoy and Wellman, seemed capable of taking on comedies, musicals, westerns and whatever else was given him with casual aplomb. One can generalise fairly safely though and say that Garnett's talkies were more imposing than his silents, and that for the most part he seemed best suited to breezy comedy thrillers like "She Couldn't Take It" and "Slightly Dishonorable". Garnett was capable of making a dog along with the best of them -- viz "Trade Winds" -- but on the whole the standard he maintained was a good one, and certainly a well varied one ("S.O.S. Iceberg", "Eternally Yours", "Stand In"). Now quite an old-timer and only spasmodically active, he is currently preparing a Western on the James Boys, to be shot in Knoxville, Tennessee.

"SLAVE SHIP" (20th Century Fox, 1937) Pro: Darryl F. Zanuck; Associate Producer, Nunnally Johnson; Original story by William Faulkner; screenplay by Sam Hellman, Lamar Trott, Gladys Lehman; Art Director, Hans Perers; Musical Score: Alfred Newman; 10 reels

With Warner Baxter, Elizabeth Allan, Wallace Beery, Mickey Rooney, George Sanders, Jane Darwell, Joseph Schildkraut, Arthur Kober, Mina Gombell, Billy Bevan, Francis Ford, 

One of a group of period sea films ("Captin Blood", "Mutiny on the Bounty", the similar but rather better "Souls at Sea") that formed quite a notable cycle in the mid-30's, "Slave Ship" was intended as a better-than-average programmer, and succeeded rather well in that aim. Today it is quite staggering to find such a cast, such photography and such fine production values in a film of no great pretentions. Despite some slow spots in the
middle sections, it still impresses, and manages to be a thrilling and not too predictable piece of melodrama. Warner Baxter always seemed to be too much the drawing-room type to be quite at home in some of the adventure films that Fox gave him, but he gives his usual sincere if rather stolid performance, and it is a very real pleasure to see the lovely Elizabeth Allen again. Beery is on top form in his standard Long John Silver role, and has some delightful lines about some native boys he once had to eat when the food ran out! The supporting cast is full of old favorites, including perennially cheerful Billy Bevan, although Miles Manders' fleeting appearances as little more than an extra suggest that he may have been a casualty of last-minute cutting. Incidentally, either the scripters or Garnett himself obviously remembered "Bante's Inferno" of a couple of years earlier, since the photographic treatment of some of the shots of the slaves in the hold is identical, and even uses the same "chant of misery" for its musical theme here.

"ONE WAY PASSAGE" (Warner Brothers, 1932) Screenplay by Wilson Mizner and Joseph Jackson from a story by Robert Lord; camera: Robert Kurrle.
7 reels.

Perhaps because it is so much off his beaten path, varied though that path be, "One Way Passage" is invariably touted as being Garnett's best film, just as the likewise off-beat "Peter Ibbetson" is held in some quarters to be Hathaway's best film. Actually, "One Way Passage" probably is Garnett's best film, but I suspect that he probably brought far less to it directorially than he did to, for example, "China Seas". With players like Powell and Kay Francis, that story-premise, and a tight script that, even with a little comedy padding, makes the most of its poignancy and emotion in a running time of less than 70 minutes, how could it really miss? Without downgrading Tay Garnett, one is inclined to wonder how much finer a film it might have been with, say, Frank Borzage directing? For it is the two leads who really make this film the success it is: William Powell, polished, underplaying superbly, and Kay Francis, making a soap opera role seem real and almost honest. Of course nobody can do better than Kay Francis at suggesting noble and beautiful women dying from those convenient fatal diseases that leave you a little short of breath and cause an occasional fainting spell, but otherwise leave no marks and certainly never get messy! Of course, the last scene - in which neither of these two players are seen - is still one of the great endings of any filmic love story, but again it is a writing rather than a directorial credit. However, perhaps it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that the film still holds up, and what a pleasure it is to see again an honestly sentimental, unpadded, genuinely moving love story of the old school. The remake in 1940, with George Brent and Merle Oberon doing quite well as substitutes for Powell and Francis, Pat O'Brien proving an improvement over Warren Hymer, and Frank McHugh repeating his old role, was titled "Till We Meet Again" and was directed by Edmund Goulding. It was pretty good, as remakes go, though padded by an extra half-hour, but as also with "Seventh Heaven", "Imitation of Life" and "The Blue Veil", it was just too slick and larger-than-life to match the slightly cruder but far more honest originals.