"CRACKERJACK" ("MAN WITH A HUNDRED FACES") Gainsborough, 1938. Directed by Albert de Courville; screenplay by Michael Pertwee and A.R. Rawlinson from a story by W.B. Ferguson; camera: Jack Cox. 7 rls.

As second-stringers to the popular Hitchcock releases, Gainsborough in the 30's put out a number of slick, light-hearted thrillers which have been all but forgotten today. Two of the best, "Non-Stop New York" and "Strange Boarders", have been singularly hard to come by, though we have high hopes of getting at least "Non-Stop New York" within a few months. "Crackerjack" was one of the less imposing films in this series of unrelated thrillers, but it's still an enjoyable and fast-moving film in the "Raffles" tradition.

Even though in retrospect, the Korda films of the 30's seem to be the biggest and most important British films of the period, Gainsborough at the time made the biggest impression at the British boxoffice. It was a more prolific company, geared to production in quantity, and turning out "B" films as well as "A". It also had the biggest stable of popular British stars, and because of its assured U.S. release through a tie-up with Fox, it also made more use of American names. "Crackerjack" was only a programmer by Gainsborough standards, but still it was put over with real production values -- polish, sets and slick camerawork that stand up well today.

Tom Walls, its star, was in the process of trying to secure a new "image". For many years prior to this, he had been typed in bedroom farces, and primarily in a series of comedies where he played a jeering equivalent of Groucho Marx, and was partnered by Robertson Hare, representing stuffy British respectability, and Ralph Lynn, the caricatured "silly ass" Englishman. These films had come to an end, and for a time at least Walls was aiming at the William Powell--Thin Man kind of screen character. But the old comedy leers sneaked through too often, and it wasn't until the 40's, when he switched to older character roles, that he created a new screen image as successful as the old.

"Crackerjack" has bright dialogue, enough action to keep it going, some traditionally involved plotting and counter-plotting, the expected super-criminal gimmicks with secret rooms and radio devices, and all the trimmings of mystery and detective fiction of the thirties. If it never gives out with any spectacular excitement, it never promises any either. It's the filmic equivalent of the quiet and civilized mystery novel so popular in paper-backs at the time, and within its own framework, it works quite well. The print is in surprisingly good condition, considering that it must be some 25 years old, but the very last shot is missing. This is merely a comedy wrap-up, in which the hero prevents his valet from getting into his plane with him, and hardly affects the plot which has been quite neatly concluded some minutes before.

---INTERMISSION---

"EVERGREEN" (Gainsborough, 1935) Directed by Victor Saville; music by Rodgers and Hart; original length: 98 minutes; this print, consisting solely of the key musical numbers, 40 mins. With Jessie Matthews, Barry McKay, Sonnie Hale.

By now, we assume that from announcements at our last two well-attended programs, and word of mouth, all of you know that the promised "slightly abridged" print -- despatched to us, but not received at the time we issued our Bulletin -- is a
spectacular illustration of British understatement. None of the story is left, except as can be ascertained from snatches of dialogue between the numbers. In a sense though, while a different entity than we were expecting, it is rather satisfactory. Since there is no attempt at condensation, it hardly comes under the heading of a "cut print," yet it is rather more than just "excerpts." The numbers are so delightful that they will well bear a repeat viewing in the complete print which we are still on the track of.

The numbers are delightful in themselves, and one of them, a curious "Cannon Fodder" routine, seems to have been sired by Fritz Lang and Bussy Berkley, a kind of amalgamation of "My Forgotten Man" and "Metropolis." Perhaps the numbers pay off so well because they are Rodgers and Hart at their best -- tuneful and nostalgic -- yet quite apart from that obvious asset, they have a zip and a streamlined polish extremely rare in British musicals of the 30's, which usually tried to ape Hollywood, and failed diamally. But even Warners wouldn't be ashamed of the flair that has gone into these numbers, and it makes one greedy for more of the Mathews films. I recall many of her production numbers being big and elaborate, although I hadn't recalled them being this good. However, this may be due to a kind of unwitting native snobbery. Just as a Frenchman in the current "Films and Filming" decodes Max Linder as being dull and over-rated, so many Britons tended to downgrade Jessie Mathews as being a second-string Ruby Keeler. I remember as a child (I was four and five when Jessie was at her peak) finding Jessie Mathews "vulgar." However, I find now that I was (perhaps understandably) using the wrong adjective. "Erotic" is a better word, yet coupled with a kind of wholesomeness that dilutes any element of offensiveness, Jessie certainly took off more of her clothes (especially in "Friday the 13th") than any other British star of that time, yet through it all she remains a rather jolly sort, rather like Ann Miller. Certainly her unique personality and vivacity come through very attractively in these excerpts, and were more of her films available, one can easily foresee her becoming a favorite of the cultists. "Evergreen," not altogether a typical Mathews film, was considered one of her best. A big success in the U.S., too, it was one of the few British movies of the 30's (Along with the Hitchcocks and "Private Life of Henry the 8th") to receive a general reissue here a few years after its initial release.

"LUCKY DEVILS" (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by Ralph Ince; produced by David O. Selznick; story by Casey Robinson & Bob Rose; screenplay by Agnes Christine Johnson & Ben Markson; camera: J. Roy Hunt; 6 reels.


Considering what exciting possibilities the subject has, it's amazing that there has never been a really good movie on Hollywood stuntmen. When one is attempted, it usually turns out to be a real cheater like "Sons of Adventure" (directed by Canutt) or "Hollywood Stunt Man" in which a grade "B" action plot is dressed up with old stock-footage stunts. "Lucky Devils" isn't the definitive stuntman film either, but at least it's the most carefully made to date, and is consistently interesting if not always convincing. The plot is sheer soap opera, and the attempts to "get behind the tinsel and show the real Hollywood" are just ludicrous. Every complication, including who dies when and who has a baby next, is readily predictable, and some of the "subtle" bits -- like that flashing "Hollywood" sign -- are absurd. The stunts themselves (sometimes done, unforgivably, with miniatures or other trick effects) are unrealistically staged in a very haphazard fashion, as though stunts were all blind luck. Yet, it's all rather enjoyable: treat it not as "Sunset Boulevard," but as a piece of serial-like hokum, and you should have a good if not too informative 65 minutes. But if it isn't already too late, let's hope that this won't one day wind up as the "official" film on Hollywood stuntmen!
An important notice re "EVERGREEN" playing on March 30th

When we first announced "Evergreen" last month, we indicated that it was an edited print with, however, all of the musical numbers intact. Inadvertently, we neglected to repeat this information in our regular 3-month schedule that was mailed out at the beginning of March.

The print was then in transit from England, and it's a pity that it didn't arrive in time for us to be more specific. It now has arrived, and we find that its completeness (or rather, its abbreviation) was quite sadly misrepresented to us. We were told that "some of the story had been trimmed out", which is a masterpiece of understatement even by British standards!

What in fact we have is a 40-minute reel (of a 98 minute film) which consists of ALL of the musical numbers, in sequence, and NONE of the story, except as can be ascertained by snatches of dialogue in outtakes from the musical numbers.

In a sense this is rather satisfactory. The numbers are delightful in themselves, surprisingly elaborate, tuneful in the best Rodgers and Hart manner, and a fine showcase for the charming and sometimes erotic talents of Jessie Matthews. One number in particular, a "Cannon Fodder" routine, seems to have been sired by Busby Berkeley and Fritz Lang, a kind of amalgamation of "My Forgotten Man" and "Metropolis".

In short then, this is a totally different entity than we expected. Since there is no attempt at condensation, it hardly comes under the heading of a "cut print". And since it represents almost half of the picture's total running time, it is a little more than "excerpts". Disappointing though this turn of events is, it's a most enjoyable compilation -- and shouldn't spoil our later pleasure at seeing a complete version, which we're still working on.

There is presumably no reason to issue a complete mailing on this, since with tonight's program we can be sure of reaching most of our "regulars", and word of mouth between now and the 30th will probably take care of the rest. However, this does shorten our May 30th program a little, and we'll probably add a shortish (6-7 reels) feature to the bill. At this stage, we're not quite sure what it'll be of course, but we'll know at least a week ahead of time and announce it on our March 23 notes.

Incidentally, we're making this "Evergreen" reel available to the New Yorker Theatre to run with "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" (also Rodgers and Hart, shown by this society last year) on Monday night, March 29th, the evening prior to our own show. If you haven't seen "Hallelujah I'm a Bum", you should, and the combination makes a fine program. If your major interest is in "Evergreen", I recommend you catch it at our program -- mainly because it's a dupe print (though an exceptionally good one) and picture and sound will come off better in a smaller room.

By the way, two of the items that we have stock-piled and didn't have room for this session, but will get to in June are Rowland Brown's "Hell's Highway" with Richard Dix, and Ralph Ince's "Lucky Devils", an early sound tome on stunt men, with Bill Boyd, William Gargan, Bruce Cabot, Lon Chaney Jr and Dorothy Wilson.