Monday next, May 11th: "THE CRUISE OF THE JASPER B" (1926, dir: James Horne) with Rod la Rocque and Mildred Harris, preceded by "HIS PEOPLE" (1925, dir: Edward Sclaman) with Rudolph Schildkraut.

Note: the only temporarily available "His People", loaned by the AFI and Mrs. Schildkraut, is replacing the Selig film "Crisis", which will be re-scheduled within the coming month.

May 4 1970

Katharine Hepburn: 1933

"CHRISTOPHER STRONG" (RKO Radio, 1933) Directed by Dorothy Arzner
Produced by David O. Selznick; Associate Producer, Pandro S. Berman; scenario by Zoe Akins from a story by Gilbert Frankau; Camera, Bert Glennon; music by Heinz Roemheld; montage effects by Sarno York, A. C. Warbeck.

With Katharine Hepburn, Colin Clive, Billie Burke, Helen Chandler, Ralph Forbes, Jack La Rue, Irene Browne, Gemmoline Logan, Desmond Roberts, Margaret Lindsay.

Although "Christopher Strong" is often dismissed as being a lesser Hepburn film, I must confess to regarding it as one of her best, and certainly one of her most entertaining. It's a no-nonsense vehicle which skips through its absurdities briskly, giving the characters - especially the ladies - exactly what they want, but never allowing the plot ramifications to become protracted enough to pall. Hepburn, as the rather self-satisfied heroine, is lively and gives one of her most graceful and forceful performances; moreover, thanks to Bert Glennon's superb camerawork and an incredible array of gowns, she always looks stunning. A shimmering Silver Screen outfit is a real eye-popper, although garbed in austere black, and framed by two flickering candles, she's quite breath-taking too. Even if one is not normally a Hepburn devotee (and certainly I am not), one is apt to be won over by her playing and her appearance in this film. In its own oblique way, it is quite a typical depression movie - not a single reference is made to the depression, and everything is opulence, luxury and success, yet the rich and powerful are shown to be unhappy and the whole sequence of their way of life. The secondary plot-line, of youth rebelling against convention, is curiously up-to-date, although the 1933 conception of rebellion already seems dignified and old-hat by the lamentable 1970 standards. The frequent interpolation of newsreel footage (to bolster Hepburn's aviatrix activities) are possibly a mistake; they tend to bring an uneasy reality to what might work better as a full-blooded soap opera, and also the footage is good enough and interesting enough to send one's mind scurrying for real-life parallels. Incidentally, the opening sequence seems to have been chopped rather carelessly later that year in Barrymore's "Long Lost Lover"; the similarity being even less coincidental through having Helen Chandler play the rebellious daughter in both films. Although Hepburn certainly dominates, Colin Clive gives his traditionally torrented portrait as the hero, Billie Burke is most touching, Helen Chandler fascinating as always, and Margaret Lindsay, who did "Cavalcade" that same year, has an uncredited bit as a very British society belle. Max Steiner's music even includes a repetition of the tortured piano theme from "The Most Dangerous Game" at one point!

"LITTLE WOMEN" (RKO Radio, 1933) Directed by George Cukor; produced by David O. Selznick; Associate Producer, Kenneth Macgowan; Screenplay by Sara S. Mason & Victor Heerman from the novel by Louisa May Alcott; Camera, Henry Gerrard.

Music: Max Steiner; 12 reels

With Katharine Hepburn, Joan Bennett, Paul Lukas, Frances Dee, Jean Parker, Spring Byington, Douglas Montgomery, Henry Stephenson, John Lodge, Samuel S. Hinds, Hydum Westman, Nabel Colcord, Olin Howland.

When MGM's glossy Technicolor remake with Elizabeth Taylor hit the market, one's mind went scurrying back to this original with nostalgia. Even if one hadn't seen it, the combination of Selznick, Cukor and that cast indicated that it had to be infinitely superior. Yet I'm not sure that it is. The remake was sugary and ironically so 'sweet' as to be quite tasteless; it was a bad film, but fun in its own way. The original has impeccable taste, and with more of that frankly becomes rather boring and unimaginative. Perhaps there's just nothing that even such a cast can do with Louisa May Alcott. The remake actually was surprisingly faithful to this one: structurally; it is almost the same, and the incredible over-scoring is a fault of both, with the original music repeated the second time around. Mary Astor (in the remake) was an improvement over Spring Byington, though June Allyson's blatant Hepburn takes on a regression, and one was actually rooting for Margaret O'Brien to die off - quickly, and if possible in some leathem manner - while here Jean Parker is most touching and poigniant. The Christmas breakfast sequence is one of the ghastliest pieces of slurry ever inflicted on literature or the movies - but if you can survive that, the neat style and composition of the camerawork, and the sheer pleasure of seeing such a cast, compensate for a great deal. In any case, presumably 90% of our audience tonight are here for Hepburn, so to them the film needs neither explanation or apology.