After Ronald Colman's enormous personal success in "Bulldog Drummond", Goldwyn seemed to shunt him ("Arrowsmith" always excepted) from his esteemed romantic rogue role to another. "Raffles" was the obvious if less successful follow-up; "Condemned" (slow, old-fashioned, distinguished today only by Toland's fine camerawork) and tonight's "The Unholy Garden" further variants on the same character. Actually "The Unholy Garden" often runs an astonishingly close parallel to "Papa Le Hokp"/"Algiers", although of course it pre-dates them both, and it also has some accidental similarities to Willman's "Safe in Hell" as well. Though the setting is restricted and it tells most of its story by dialogue, making it look at times like a stage derivation, although it isn't, it moves quite well. The gallery of characters is rich and colorful, and it is never entirely predictable, coming up with quite an unexpected twist for the climax. Like all Goldwyn's of the period, it is a handsome production, and certainly a good vehicle for Colman.

"The Whole Town's Talking" (Columbia, 1935) Directed by John Ford; produced by Lester Cowan; screenplay by Jo Swerling and Robert Riskin from a story by W.R. Burnett; Camera: James Wong Howe; U.S. premiere, Radio City Music Hall; European title: "Passport to Fame". 9 reels With Edward G. Robinson, Jean Arthur, Wallace Ford, Arthur Byron, Ettiene Girardot, Donald Meek, Arthur Hohl, Paul Harvey, Ed Brophy, James Donlin, John Wray, J.C. Carroll MacDonald, Effie Eliaser, Frank Sheridan, Edward Heams, Ethan Laidlaw, Stanley Blystone, Hal Price, Brooks Benedict, Robert E. O'Connor, Ernie Adams, Clarence Wilson, Enmet Vogan, Frank Ford, Joe Sawyer, Charles King. Larry Blyeke. "The Whole Town's Talking" (as shown by this society nine years ago) is an extremely good film; efficient, I thought far more expensive than it is, well cast and unusually well handled in its action and comic aspects. However, it comes off better as a film than as a comedy, and somehow one always has the feeling that Ford isn't quite the right director for it. Comedy was never his strongest forte and too, Burnett and Robinson - the old "Little Caesar" team - seem just a little too much of a powerhouse for him, even though Robinson had shown in "Little Giant" and others that he could be a good if limited comedian. In any event, despite a Preston Sturges-like emphasis on speed, chaos and noise, the story itself seems to take precedence over its own comic possibilities. Much of the lighting and camerawork is also so much in the accepted gangster cycle mold that the balance is further shirited. Establishing Robinson's cold, cold-eyed murderer in one scene was probably thought necessary in order to lose audience sympathy for him prior to his own sticky end, but up to that point he has been quite a likeable fellow, and the change is disturbing. Bogart in "It All Came True" managed to remain sympathetic despite being established as a killer; here it doesn't work as well. However, these are the criticisms one can make so successfully in retrospect when we are more familiar both with Ford's work in general and the movie society of the 30's in particular. In 1935, with the gangster cycle still in full swing, story values counted far more than satirical ones. And too, while the dual role gimmick was no longer new, it wasn't common-place either, and with Robinson cast as both a vicious killer and a meek clerk, the well-photographed trick role still had novelty value in itself. The film was a solid if not spectacular success at the time. Curiously, in Europe, some reviews credited it to Walter Lang. More than one critic too complicated the working of the lack of cohesion and suggested that the film might have been too heavily edited or done. Only the casual way we are asked to accept Robinson's hopeless infatuation for Jean Arthur, the appearance of an aunt (after much talk about her) suggest that a lot more footage was shot than was used. On the whole though, despite its uneven qualities, it stands up rather better than most comedy-crime films of the period, including Tyr Garnett's "The Couldn't Take It" and Ford's own, earlier "Up the River".

Points of note: Most of the big prison scenes are of course stock from Harks' "The Old Dark House". It's a small but persistent belief that the film is a remake of the 1931 "Red Poppy", grown together with Jean Arthur - probably prompted by the fact that that was a remake of Universal's silent "The Whole Town's Talking", from an Emerson-Lose play. The fact that Jean Arthur actually starred in Columbia's "Talk of the Town" merely adds to the confusion. Frank Capra in his very readable but inaccurate autobiography, credits the success of his (1937) "Lost Horizon" with Ford being given the freedom to make this (1935) movie.

--- Richard Morris ---