perhaps best known to posterity for being affectatiously (and inaccurately) described by W.C. Fields as "that dago son-of-a-bitch", Gregory La Cava has always been an unpredictable and inconsistent talent. Because of his somewhat moribund and seemingly unplanned working methods, producers usually feared to entrust major properties to him - even though his films usually did come in under budget and made money. His erratic modus operandi seemed best suited to crazy comedy - and indeed, his best-known films are humor-oriented comedies, ranging from "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" to "It's a Wonderful Life" to the 1936 "My Man Godfrey". But his legendary irresponsibility prevented a steady flow of product, and for a career that spanned the 20's, 30's and 40's (his last film was Gene Kelly's "Living in a Big Way" in 1947), and encompassed political melodrama, "confession" soap operas and romances as well as wacky comedies, the overall output is comparatively small. Producer Walter Wanger was one of the few executives who had real faith in him, and from their collaboration two of La Cava's best films emerged - "Gabriel over the White House" and tonight's "Private Worlds". Neither of these are comedies of course, although the balance of tonight's program will cover some of La Cava's comedy work.


In 1935 "Private Worlds" was considered a genuinely "daring" film, and this impact has inevitably faded today. There is just nothing left to be "daring" about on the screen today, unless one wants to make a straight version of "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" or "The Blue Bird". Still, one can recognise and applaud the original courage of a "Private Worlds" in 1935, when the depression was salling for more and more escapism, and when the Production Code, at its height, was amusing serious adult cinematic discussion. Admittedly its study of life in an asylum is conducted on the level of the emotional novel rather than the stark level of the much later "The Snake Pit". But it was still quite a breakthrough, for this was well before the adaptation of psychiatry by melodramas and thrillers, first in "Blind Alley", and much later in films of the "Spellbound" ilk. Despite occasional medical naiveté, "Private Worlds" holds up amazingly well; it is literate, well acted, unemotional. It makes far more sense, both emotionally and medically, than that curiously similar film of the 50's - "The Cobweb" - which oddly enough featured Charles Boyer in an almost identical role. It also has much more depth, power and poignancy than most of the other movie adaptations in the early and mid 30's of big emotional best-selling novels - "Imitation of Life", "Magnificent Obsession", "White Banners" - all of which seem very shallow and syruppy today.

For an allegedly erratic director, La Cava shows genuine discipline throughout all of "Private Worlds". Admittedly, all of his films have kept what they had to say clearly on the surface. A former cartoonist, he always constructed his films much like comic-strips, and it would be fairly easy to tell their stories quite reliably by a series of captioned stills from them. He is only occasionally creative when he really wants to be; sometimes there are awkward transitions, or no transitions at all, and the film just ends rather than coming to a real climax. Nevertheless, the measured and straightforward pace pays off, and makes all the more effective La Cava's two stylish bravura sequences - a wild delirium sequence in a ward, which bears comparison with the similar sequence in Wilder's "The Lost Weekend"; and Joan Bennett's "mad" scene. Despite the unobtrusive musical use of "Les Preludes" here, and the clichéd tilted camera, the scene is still powerful - and La Cava's use of the sound track, music apart, is not clichéd. One considers how little he cared about actors in other films ("My Man Godfrey" he just left everyone alone, so that the professionals like Powell alone, while those who needed direction, and specifically Lombard, just fumbled), he handles them extremely well here. Boyer's surprisingly good performance was probably his best to date, at least in a Hollywood film, and there are some very touching minor performances - especially the vignette at the opening by the cured patient, tenderly expressing thanks as he returns to the world. Considering how fast "The Cobweb" dated - and how soon that other Phyllis Bottome adaptation, "The Natural Storm", seemed artificial - the staying power of "Private Worlds", both as a film and as an entertainment, is quite remarkable.

Wa K. Everson