Since we have played Wellman & Curtiz films here before in prior series, I won't take space here to repeat notes on their overall quality, but will cover these in my introductory comments. Although one or two other Warner films are scattered throughout this series, tonight's program is our only (and almost obligatory) nod to the typical uninhibited Warner programmers of the early 30's... and although one is a stark drama, and the other basically a comedy, they both have a rather endearing naivete which makes them gravitate together quite naturally.

"SAFE IN HELL" (First National, 1931) Director: William Wellman Scenario by Nadea Fulton from a play by Houston Branch. Cameraw: Barney McGill.

"Safe in Hell" is another of the prodigious number of obscure and now forgotten plays that became movie fodder in the early days of sound, the romantic and genteel ones going to Eiko, and the gutierrez ones to Warners. So many of them had basically good little stories that still needed good directors and casts to make anything out of them that it's not surprising that they lit so theatrical bonfires. Of course, they didn't revolutionize the talkies either, but they did contribute strong and off-beat stories which are often far meatier than those contrived by the contract studio writers. "Safe in Hell", with its roots in "Sadie Thompson", is a curious little film. Most of it takes place in one basic set, solid and well designed to permit camera movement, but inevitably betraying its theatrical origin.
However, Wellman never allows it to become just a photographed play. In fact, sometimes he tries too hard to keep it filmic via the obtrusively off-beat camera angle. But on the whole the camerawork is very pleasing, and includes some extremely well-composed two-shots of Mackaill and Cook. And of course the theatrical flavor of plot, characters and dialogue has a richness in itself; rarely in one film have we seen so many lecherous rascals lust over "the only white woman on the island", or making her - and us - a trifle nauseous by explaining why the water has "triggles" in it! Too grim to be a "fun" movie, too insignificant to be "art"; it really offers no valid reason for having been made - yet it's startling, holding and moving in turn. Like Everest, it's there, and deserves to be made available for seeing at least this once. It fills us in just a little more on Wellman and reminds us once more what a warm and sensitive actress Dorothy Mackaill was. What a pity that she has been so forgotten by writers and historians of the film, even though so fondly remembered by movietaors of the 20's and early 30's.

"JIMMY THE GENT" (Warner Brothers, 1934) Director: Michael Curtiz Screenplay by Bertan Millhaufer from a story by Laird Doyle and Ray Nazarro; Camera: Ira Kogan.
With: James Cagney, Bette Davis, Alice White, Allen Jenkins, Arthur Hohl, Alan Dinehart, Ralph Harolde, Phillip Reed, Nora Lane, Mayo Methot, Hilt Kibbee, Robert Homans, Dennis O'Keefe, Robert Cavanagh, Lee Morin, Adele Francis, Robert Warwick, Joseph Crehan, Leon Huddie.

A rather tawdry comedy with a quite unattractive hero (and Cagney's crew-cut makes his bashessmhow less breezy than usual), "Jimmy the Gent" at first seems to fit into the "Blonde Crazy" category. But "Blonde Crazy" was merely a film that changed its mind, and its direction, too often. "Jimmy the Gent" is a one-direction film, and its curious atmosphere is obviously what it was driving for; in its brittle and sometimes morbid way, it is to the comedy-melodrama of the 20's what Folonsky's "Force of Evil" was to the crime films of the 40's. One doesn't like it instantly, but somehow its mood grows on one. Dialogue, pacing and situations are lively and clever, and Alice White is at her best. (When asked what she'd do for 500, she pertly replies 'I'd do my best!') And Alan Dinehart is so superbly corrupt a smoothie that one is almost taken in by him. Bette Davis, blonde, and as badly photographed (deliberately) as she was in most of her 1934 Warners movies is frequently overshadowed by Bessie White and Dinehart, and the cracking lines.

-------- William K. Everson --------