An evening of "Charm"

"ARE PARENTS PEOPLE?" (Paramount, 1925) Director: Mal St. Clair
Scenario by Frances Agnew from the Saturday Evening Post story by Alice Duer Miller; Camera, Bert Gleason; 5 reels
With Betty Bronson, Adolphe Menjou, Florence Vidor, Lawrence Gray, Andre Beranger, Emily Fitzroy, Mary Beth Milford, Wm. Courtwright.

Both of tonight's directors - and their stars, Betty Bronson and Nancy Carroll - warrant far more attention and coverage than we can hope to give them in these brief notes, but the introductory talk, and the discussion period afterwards, should enable us to fill in the gaps.

"Are Parents People?" is one of the most enjoyable of the comedies of manners that pleasantly filled the screens in the mid-20's at substantially American directors' St. Clair, Santella and Santella. The film marks a milestone in the growth of the American comedy of manners, from the very promising "The Smiling Lieutenant" until then held in check on lesser material, to bloom overnight as masters of sophistication. It is a fine example of the light social comedy that has completely gone from the screen today. With a plot that is admittedly no more than pleasant trivia, fodder for a tv half-hour "situation" series today, it sparkles throughout, wagging an astonishing yet friendly finger at the audience throughout for being possessed of the same human foibles that motivate the story. Most of all, it confirms once again that the lack of sound was no handicap to the cleverly used silent director. Never has that fact been as graphically shown in a silent film as in this.

The camera doesn't move once; yet editing, pacing, camera placement is such that every desired effect is achieved instantly. The heroine's decision at one point, for example, is conveyed merely by having the camera focus on her ankles. It's only five minutes before we get the first subtitle - and the titles thereafter are brief and to the point. An elegant film, with well-lit interiors and funny period exteriors, it offers a most amusing spoof of the Barronmel of "Beau Brummel", but the bulk of its comedy is gentle, drawing much of its appeal from the smooth playing of Menjou and Vidor, and most of it from the gaiety and vivacious charm of its lovely young star Betty Bronson, who had made such a hit the year before as "Peter Pan".

-HOT SATURDAY- (Paramount, 1932) Directed by William Seiter
Scenario by Seton Miller, Josephine Lovett and Joseph Moncuere
March from an original story by Harvey Ferguson; Camera:
Arthur L. Todd; 7 reels

What impresses most about "Hot Saturday" is its relaxed sophistication. Sophistication was certainly not new or rare in 1932, the year of "Trouble in Paradise" and "Love Me Tonight", but it was in those films a very conscious sophistication. But in its own less ambitious way, "Hot Saturday" is a film of equal maturity, full of assured playing and excellent dialogue, so naturalistically welded that many pungent lines are almost lost because of the off-hand way they are delivered. Good taste was always a keynote of William Seiter's work, both in his silents and in his very prolific sound career too, and it is a constant factor in "Hot Saturday". It is a pre-Code movie, and makes no bones about sex in a couple of sequences. But it never strives for shock, or tries to prove how "adult" it is by hitting us over the head with its implications. Although like many depressions-era movies it has its Cinderella aspects, it's not really an "early 30's" movie in the accepted sense. The fashions, the cars, the remarks about Hoover and prohibition, all place it in the pre-New Deal era, but essentially it's a picture about youth and cooperative immorality. It's undated by period in the sense that its characters and attitudes are still valid - somewhere, if not in New York - and that we can all of us perhaps fit in it somewhat in a few of our own years of growing up. One of its charms is that its "ordinary" people have none of the excesses of virtues and vices that Frank Capra's stereotypes regaled us with in the 30's; the worst vices of its "villains" are petulance, childishness and shrewishness. Its overall cheerfulness is enhanced by liberal pilfering of the Rodgers & Hart and Strauss melodies owned by Paramount, by the pleasing playing of Cary Grant & Randolph Scott (rivals in love at the end of the 30's too in "My Favorite wife") and most especially by the utterly winning elfin personality of lovely Nancy Carroll.

-WILLIAM K. EVerson