"TORCH SINGER" (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Alexander Hall and George Seem; Screenplay by Lenore Coffee and Lynn Starling from "Mike" Budden. Cast: Jack Oakie, Carl Brisson, Karl Schuschnigg, 74 minutes.


There will be a ten minute intermission between the two films.

As you know, we had originally planned to show Clarence Brown's "wife versus secretary" as our second film today, and decided against it only when this long unavailable film was suddenly thrust into commercial reissue. Having already had a week's exhibition in NY, and placed back in circulation, it seemed a waste of our limited dates to repeat it. In one way we're sorry; it was the absolute epitome of the lush, glossy, totally dishonest soap-opera. It oozes luxury and wealth, and, all of the protagonists are "nice" people, none of them are in the situation to get upset, and everybody winds up happily married or wealthy or both. But it has literally no contact whatsoever with reality, and "I Found Stella Parish" makes perhaps a more apt comparison with "Torch Singer" since both are by definition "tear-jerkers" rather than soap-opera, though admittedly the dividing line is often thin. "Torch Singer" is a curiosity indeed: a stark, Warner-Brothers type of sex and confession melodrama, but done with the glossier, ladies' magazine approach prevalent at Paramount. It's steering clear of the raw, but more honest characters that peopled such stories at Warners. None of it is very credible, and since Miss Colbert rises from abandoned unwed mother to luxury and the top income tax bracket with untoward alacrity, it doesn't even have the superficial realism of the Chatterton, Davis, Stanwyck and Francis travails in Burbank. (It's also hard to understand how Ricardo Cortez constantly harasses the highly-paid entertainer by reaping "But you're a torch singer!" as though she were even lower on the social-scale than those two perennial victims of the Hollywood caste system, the whores and doctors. However, it's a surprisingly enjoyable film, partly because it's so brisk that the manufactured sobbs never have time to conceal, but mainly because of Miss Colbert who holds the whole thing together with an absolute tour-de-force performance. She not only runs the emotional gamut convincingly, but puts on an altogether remarkable show as a singer. Clearly it is her voice, and she not only sings well, but "sells" her songs in terms of style, stance and body movements. It's an aspect of the Colbert personality that never showed up, so very likely, and the surprising thing is that she wasn't immediately thrust to do more of the same.

"I FOUND STELLA PARISH" is, by comparison, far more sophisticated. By setting its story in higher-society circles, much of it in England or aboard a luxury liner, it automatically avoids reflecting the grimness of the still-very-present depression years, which are so much a part of the flavor of "Torch Singer". Perhaps its flaw - if it is a flaw - is that it is too sober a production. By 1935, LeRoy was established as a vertige director and not just a workhorse; his other films that year were "Anthony Adverse", "Oil for the Lamps of China" and "Pace Miss Glory". In keeping with the dignity of at least the first two of those, this Kay Francis vehicle is restrained and intelligent when it must have been more fun to pull all the stops out and let cliche and emotionalism run amuck. And as a post-Code production, it tries to avoid the lurid and the sensational too. Both films, anyway, are expert and enjoyable reminders of that now vanished genre of film, the 'ladies' after-hours weepie' which before it was expanded (and its raw power diluted) into such grandiose deluge-scale weepies as "Dark Victory" and "Random Harvest". The Misses Colbert and Francis are both in grand form, Barton MacLane must have his smallest-ever role, and space shortage harpily curtails a discussion of the work of child star Sybil Jason! -WKE-