"That Certain Thing" (Columbia, 1928) Directed by Frank Capra
Produced by Harry Cohn; Story by Elmer Harris; titles by Al Boesberg
Camera: Joseph Walker; 70 mins.
With Viola Dana, Ralph Greaves, Burr McIntosh, Aggie Herring.

Piano accompaniment arranged and played by Stuart Oderman.

Frank Capra began his career as a writer and director of silent Harry Langdon comedies in the mid-20s, and of course found his real niche with the "social comment" comedies and dramas ("It Happened One Night") and "Lost Horizon" in the mid and late 30s.

In the 40s, from 1927 through 1933, was a curiously diversified period in which he steadily turned out comedies, gangster films and action epics in which the only real common denominator was an ever-present element of sentiment. "That Certain Thing" is one of the simplest yet one of the most enjoyable films from this period. It has a lot in common with Colleen Moore's "Orchids and Ermine", which we showed last season, in that it's a typical Cinderella story of the period, and even overlaps into such speak good talky, the comic bus sequence, here shot on the sunny Hollywood streets. But whereas the Moore film was very much a product of the 20s, "That Certain Thing" is less brittle, less prone to wisecracking, and - but for the lack of sound - could easily pass as an early 30s film. A lot of the basic roots for Capra's later "class-distinction" comedies can be found here, including a curiously savage sequence - common to later Capra films - in which the "ordinary people", normally the salt of the earth in such films, turn out to be bigoted and singularly objectionable. But the general mood is light and breezy, with the serious comments briskly disposed of. There are no great comedy highlights, but there is constant warmth and spontaneity. The film is also something of a model of how to make a "class"-looking product on a shoestring. The cast is small, and most of the sets are clearly permanent standing sets, pressed into use on other films. Stock footage is neatly and unobtrusively cut into the night-club exterior scene as establishing shots, and the ditch-digging exterior scene is shot against a stretch of studio wall. Yet it all has a far slicker and more efficient look to it than many a much bigger picture from the major studios. Incidentally, it is also an extremely rare Capra; Columbia destroyed all their original 35mm materials on this film in the mid-50s, just about the time that this original 16mm print was being uncovered in a little camera store in Connecticut. The American Film Institute has just made a preservation negative from this print, but it is just by the narrowest chance and luck that this early signpost to Capra's later career exists at all.

----- 10 minute intermission -----

"Upperworld" (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by Roy del Ruth
Screenplay by Ben Markson from a story by Ben Hecht; Camera, Tony Gaudio; 72 mins.

Loosely, something of "An American Tragedy" in reverse, this is a surprisingly unflamboyant (for Ben Hecht) and mature sex drama. Made in the first post-Code year, it is less casual and explicit about extra-marital conduct than it would have been a year or so earlier, but this may also be partly due to director Roy del Ruth who, in the period, had a knack of taking basically soap-opera material and making something thoughtful and intelligent from it. (We plan to show his quite fine "Employees' Entrance" the season after next.)

Given (and allowing for) Hollywood's basic lack of touch with reality, which results in a too extreme contrast between riches and poverty, "Upperworld" is generally speaking quite an honest and touching movie, up until its somewhat wearisome and so-so romantic finale at least. The only real cornball is against it is that the rather slightly treatment muted out to the Ginger Rogers character leaves a slightly sour taste in the mouth -- but this may well be because Miss Rogers brings such warmth and sympathy to the role that it quite possibly emerges in a far more favorable light than as written. Most films of this type tend to go overboard on melodramatics and bravura acting scenes; this one - and a much under-rated Andrea de Toth movie of 1946, "Puss in Boots" (with Mala Powers, Elizabeth Scott and Raymond Burr in literal parallels to the William-Astor-Rogers-Naish roles) -- is very much an exception. -- Wm.K.Everson