"ROXIE HART" (20th Century Fox, 1942) Directed by William A. Wellman Written and produced by Pandro B. Berman from the play "Chicago" by Maurine Watkins; Camera, Leon Shamroy; Art director, Alfred Newman; edited by James B. Clark; 76 minutes With: Ginger Rogers, Adolphe Menjou, George Montgomery, Lynne Overman, cu. of Nigel Bruce, Phil Silvers, Sara Allgood, William Frawley, Spring Byington, Ted North, Helene Reynolds, Iris Adrian, George Chandler.

It is a sobering thought to realize that "Roxie Hart" was made far closer to the roaring 20's it satirized than we are to the rather sluggish forties that it so often echoes. Now, at a time when we so often see the future overshadowed by the subtler satires that Preston Sturges was making for Paramount; yet, in retrospect, it now seems quite one of the best comedies of the 40's, with a zest, crackle and brevity that has quite vanished today. It is perhaps not as successful as Wellman's earlier "Nothing Sacred", which played its satire straight and with more irony. "Roxie Hart" tries for laughs - and certainly gets them - but its approach is broader and more obvious. And like "Broadway" (another 1929 play/movie remake in the early 40's) it wraps it up in nostalgia by making the whole story a flashback. It takes longer to witness the ground, since several scenes remind you of the flashback framework. But while the remake of "Broadway" nullled all its punches and made sure that nobody abided by the Code, "Roxie Hart" does retain the authentic spirit of the original "Chicago", though Ginger Rogers is hardly as selfconsciously in character as Phyllis Haver was. Adolphe Menjou, in a role that Barrymore would have done brilliantly in the 30's, has some beautiful lines to which he does full justice, while players like Nigel Bruce and Lynne Overman remind us anew how sadly lacking is contemporary Hollywood in stock-company character players like them.

Ten Minute Intermission


Like "Five Star Final", which we showed two weeks ago, and so many films of the early 30's, "Blessed Event" is based on a play, but apart from the occasional tell-tale exit line, its origins rarely show. Slow in starting, it soon builds to a cracking pace. Oddly enough, although it is a classic of its kind, it has had no New York exposure (theatrically or archivally) since we ran it in our first series in 1966. One of the best, best-remembered and most irreverent comedies of the early 30's, it is basically a pungent satire on Walter Winchell. But in the best nothing-sacred traditions of the day, it also launches its lampoon ammunition against commercial radio, crooners and newscasters, mothers, and racial, religious and sexual minority groups. There is also some caustic commentary on police brutality, and a delightful "black comedy" episode wherein Lee Tracy describes in loving detail all the grisly ritual of an electrocution, not only very funny, but also one of those bravura crescendo-building dialogue scenes that were such a dynamic part of theatre and movies then, with added spin to Robinson's climactic speech in "Five Star Final". Tracy had made a few films prior to "Blessed Event" but it was his brilliant performance here that really established him as a top-liner, though not, alas, for long. The film rolls along merrily, always coming up with the unexpected. A sweet old lady suddenly murmurs "Well, I'll be damned"; Dick Powell (a surprisingly subtle performance for such a complete newcomer to films; this was before all his Berkeley musicals) sings a marvellous parody of radio commercials, "The Little Pronghorn Heels & Shoes" that in itself is a parody of that old "mother" song, "My Mother's Rosary". All of the old Warner stock-company hoods, sissies and newscasters go through their accustomed paces, and even allowing for the good script and Tracy performance, one feels a totally new respect for the normally rather stodgy Roy Del Ruth after these eight exhilarating reels. The only criticism one can level is that some of the funniest lines are throwaways, coming hot on the heels of more obvious ones. On the stage, pacing to match audience reaction couldn't of course make the most of those lines; in this rapid-fire film, some of them tend to get lost in the laughter.

William K. Everson