"LADIES THEY TALK ABOUT" (Warner Brothers, 1933) Directed by William Keighley and Howard Bretherton; screenplay by Brown Holmes, William McGrath and Sidney Sutherland from an original story by Dorothy Mackaye and Carlton Miles; camera, John Seitz; 70 mins approx.

With: Barbara Stanwyck, Preston Foster, Lillian Roth, Lyle Talbot, Dorothy Burgess, Raule Eberne, Harold Huber, Robert Warwick, Ruth Donnelly, Helen Ware, DeWitt Jennings, Robert Novak, Cecil Cunningham, Helen Mann, Grace Cunard, Harold Healy, Madame Sul-Te-Jan, Harry Griibbon, Mary Gordon.

This slick prison and "confession" melodrama was ostensibly made to cash in on the notoriety surrounding the prison terms of Dorothy Mackaye and her actor husband Paul Kelly, after Kelly had killed her ex-husband in a brawl. Needless to say, the film has no connection with that particular case, and since Miss Mackaye was an actress rather than a writer it is doubtfiel that she contributed much more than her name - and permission to exploit the film as being "suggested" by her prison experiences. Considering the realistic quality of most Warner melodramas of the period, it is all rather hokey and unconvincing, but it is enjoyable and briskly-written nonsense. All of the "mean" girls are mean with a vengeance, while the "nice" lady convicts seem to have unlimited supplies of cosmetics and lingerie. All in all, prison life here seems rather jolly, and if it weren't for Madame Sul-Te-Jan, revising some of her vitriol from "The Birth of a Nation", this particular Big House, decorated with pin-ups of Douglas Fairbanks jr. and Joseph Brown, would be quite a pushover. In any event, the ladies here have a decent chance of escaping (not that Claudette Colbert, Sylvia Sidney and Wynne Gibson were having it in the much harsher prison over at Paramount). The costly sentimental music never stops, all the players are type-cast with a machine-tooled precision (Lyle Talbot for example playing exactly the same role that he had in "20,000 Years in Sing Sing") and Barbara Stanwyck has a likewise made-to-measure role, complete with obligatory big hysterical outburst. (What a pity that she and Jean Gabin were never co-starred!) Potential gangster action is often suggested, but never gets much further than a well-photographed and edited gocel-break sequence. It remains essentially a hard-bitten confession yarn, good, entertaining fun, but never for a moment to be taken seriously. Quite incidentally, this was William Keighley's last film as an apprentice director. (He had worked under Dieterle, Curtiz and others, and next year, with "Dr. Monica" and a half-dozen others, would be on his own). His best picture, "G-Men" was only two years away, and while he did share directorial credits later, the situation was reversed since on films like "Green Pastures" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" he was the veteran guiding co-directors new to film. His guide on this film, Howard Bretherton, never did escape "B's and westerns.

-- 10 minute intermission --

"THE DARK HORSE" (Warner Brothers, 1932) Directed by Alfred E. Green Original story: Melville Grossman (Darryl F. Zanuck), Joseph Jackson and Wilson Mizner, scenario by Joseph Jackson and Courtenay Territt; Camera: Sol Polito; 80 minutes


Neither a masterpiece nor a milestone, "The Dark Horse" is still a pungent and fast-moving political satire, the more notable because it was made in an election year and doesn't hesitate to kid politicians for being corrupt and the voters for being saps. It predates the partially political Preston Sturges satires by almost a decade, and unlike Sturges, doesn't soften its ultimate message. What one should have been doing is making a Sturges film, for it is after all, only a programmer of no very lofty aims. But for a minor film without the ambitions of a "Nothing Sacred", it carries quite a wallop, and like all good satire is frighteningly near the truth, as a casual perusal of any daily newspaper will show. Alfred A. Green, a gentle craftsman best remembered for his silent "Mary Pickford and Colleen Moore vehicles, keeps it all moving along quickly, helped by the flawless type-casting of the Warner stock company, with dear old Berton Churchill partitioning in his segment as the justifying and (of course) money politician. In the lead, Warren William, constantly telling us that the character shouldn't be taken seriously, could only have been bettered by John Barrymore, who would have told us that the actor playing the character shouldn't be taken seriously either. Bette Davis, in her tenth film (her biggest role to date, and next to "The Man Who Played God" her most important) is so good that one wonders anew why she was so bad (and in fairness, badly photographed and badly handled) in some of the films that followed -- "Fashions of 1934" in particular.

-- Wm. K. Everson --