"THE WORST WOMAN IN PARIS?" (Fox, 1933) Direction & original story, Monta Bell; scenario, Monta Bell and Marion Dix; Camera, Hal Mohr; 78 mins. With Adolphe Menjou, Benita Hume, Helen Chandler, Harvey Stephens, Margaret Seddon, Adele St. Maur, Leonard Carey, Naide Turner, George Irving.

Monta Bell, Chaplin's assistant director on "A Woman of Paris", became in the mid and late twenties, a major rival to Ernst Lubitsch as a purveyor of slick comedy sophistication. However, like Harry D'Arrast and Mal St. Clair, two other rivals in the Lubitsch stakes, visual elegance was one of his key virtues, and despite the apparent contradiction of tonight's film, he was never too much at home in talkies. As Lubitsch's star ascended, Bell's waned, and today he is little known, but not forgotten. The "Worst Woman in Paris?" is a particularly useful signpost to Lubitsch's talents, since it represents a small triumph of style over matter. The plot - pleasant romantic comedy from Frou Frou - is frankly old-fashioned, fairly predictable, and inclined to sag a little in the middle portions when Menjou's urbanity and the Parisian background is missing from the screen. Thus one really has a chance to see what Bell does with standardized material, and what elegance and charm he brings to it. Space and time transitions for example are handled beautifully with amusing shots of tiny boats or trains making their way across oceans or maps; one remembers the heroine's sleepless frustration and indecision is conveyed by a shot of her racing through the shadow-face of an enormous clock, the kind of stylised shot that had almost disappeared from the more realistic films of the 30's. Directorially at least - and admittedly arguably - "The Worst Woman in Paris?" is probably a better-directed film than "Bluebeard's 8th Wife". There Lubitsch was entirely sure of himself; backed up by players and a script that couldn't miss, he never felt the need to extend himself, and all that was necessary was to keep the well-oiled parts in motion. The charm of the film springs naturally from the witty dialogue and the smoothness of the playing: the charm of "The Worst Woman in Paris" however springs mainly from Bell's visual sense, although the timing of minor comedy scenes is unobtrusively expert too. Apart from Bell however we should also mention the serene and gracious performance by Benita Hume, too often wasted in sympathetic "other-women" roles (as in "Tarzan Escapes") but here utterly winning in what is probably her best - and biggest - screen role.

--- ten minute intermission ---

"BLUEBEARD'S EIGHTH WIFE" (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch Screenplay by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett from the play by Alfred Sevior; Camera, Leo Tover; Music, Werner Heymann; 80 minutes. With: Gary Cooper, Claudette Colbert, David Niven, Edward Everett Horton, Elizabeth Patterson, Warren Hymer, Herman Bing, Franklyn Pangbourne, Tom Ricketts, Lawrence Grant, Berlone Borland, Charles Halton, Albert Conti.

"Bluebeard's Eighth Wife", originally a stage vehicle for Ina Claire, and two years later screen material for Gloria Swanson under Sam Wood's direction, here marks the end of Lubitsch's "private comedy" period, for a changing Europe and the onrush of World War Two, were to make this kind of material forever obsolete. It was also Lubitsch's last comedy for Paramount, and while it was far short of the standards set by his 1932 masterpiece "Trouble in Paradise", it was still so superior to "Design for Living" and "Angel" that it in no way indicated any kind of decline. Elegant from first scene to last, brightly paced, written and played, flawlessly constructed so that Mesars, Bing and Pangbourne have their own specialist highlights and backed by a charmingly spirited score, it may not represent Lubitsch at his most imaginative best; but it does offer him going comfortably and stylishly through the paces that suited him best. If it remains a filmed play it hardly matters, since its deftness and satiric use of music give it a satirical gloss that would have been impossible on stage, and Claudette Colbert - who never looked lovelier nor was gowned more luxuriously - works wonders with her material. The would-be seduction scene is a masterpiece of its kind, quite worthy on rewatching with Barbara Stanwyck's classic onslaught after Henry Fonda's virtue in Preston Sturges' "The Lady Eve." Sadly, the line, "But its line is a way to losing best" in this country, Paramount's story-rights expired long ago, so they thus do not have it available for theatrical or tv showings. Since nobody owns it here, nobody has any vested interest in its preservation, and reputedly this well-worn (but fully complete): east: print is the only one left in this country. Trivia note: look very closely and you may spot Sacha Guitry emerging from a hotel in one of the background process shots.

--- Wm. K. Eversh --