"SAILOR'S LUCK" (Fox, 1933) Directed by Raoul Walsh
Scenario by Marguerite Roberts and Charlotte Miller; Camera, Arthur Miller; 6 reels

"Sailor's Luck" is a virtually unknown film, only recently dusted off by Fox and made available for a (thus-far) little shown tv package, but otherwise never revived. It's a "small" film for a director of Raoul Walsh's stature to make at that time - it immediately preceded the much bigger and star-studded "The Bowery" - but such were the vagaries of the contract-director system of the studios in those days, that it was not at all uncommon for major directors to intersperse programmers among blockbusters. In any case, the James Dunn-Sally Eilers team had a considerable boxoffice following, so the film was of more commercial consequence than might now seem apparent. A warning; seldom has any so enjoyable a film had such an abyssal opening. The first ten minutes or so are so flat and heavy-handed that one wonders not only why it was made, but why one is staying to see it! Then, almost like a light switch being turned on - and as suddenly, just as the sailors call on Esther Muir and she sings out "who's that knocking at my door?" - the film springs suddenly to life, and becomes a fast, raucous, raucy Raoul Walsh comedy, with pleasing overtones of honest and simple sentiment in the romantic scenes. Although it doesn't explicitly require Code freedom (as "The Bowery" most certainly did), the relaxed censorship is well in evidence. Boy and girl have obviously "been around", and even the last scene, overlapping into the end title, is a sex gag. Short and extremely fast-paced (once that opening drudgery is disposed of) it scores perhaps best of all on the unpredictability of its performances. Frank Moran's intellectual rough-neck is a surprising blueprint for the similar performances he gave for Preston Sturges in the 40's, and Victor Jory's lecherous smoothie of a landlord is a classic of comic villainy. The playing of Dunn and Eilers is sympathetic and pleasing too, but their thunder is easily stolen by Mr. Jory. Not however, by Sammy Cohen, the unfunster half of the Cohen-Ted McNamara comedy team, and for a while promoted by Fox as a solo comedian.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

"THE RAGE OF PARIS" (Universal, 1938) Directed by Henry Koster
Producer: S.C. DeSylva; Screenplay, Bruce Manning and Felix Jackson; Camera: Joseph Valentine; Music: Charles Previn; 7 reels.

Made just five years after "Sailor's Luck", "The Rage of Paris" is a totally different kind of romantic comedy - elegant, frothy but made with both eyes very much on the Production Code. Although such films as this (and it is exceptionally good, but on exception) would seem to belie it, the late 30's was not a good period for comedy. The fast, wacky comedies and satires of the earlier 30's were behind us, having come to a hilarious climax with "Nothing Sacred" the year before. Sophisticated sex comedy was largely hamstrung by the rigidity of the Production Code, and only Lubitsch was really still in there trying - although the differences between his "Trouble in Paradise" (1932) and 1938's "Bluebeard's Eighth Wife" make his problems painfully apparent. Charm, however, was a quality that the Code couldn't afford. But this film has it in full measure, helped out by the excellence of setting (the mood is established right away by the luxury of the main titles) and the assured playing of the two stars, Miss Darrieux a delight in her American debut. Both of the leads play sophisticated innocents, and the risque complications that develop are all of course misunderstandings, or carefully-guided wrong "interpretations" from the audience. Henry Koster, who directed, was a master at this kind of tasteful frou-frou, and had successfully guided the early Deanna Durbin vehicle, "The Rose of Paris" is very much up to that level of Durbin vehicle, gracefully upgraded for a slightly more mature age-group. It's odd that such a pleasing silken web should have been spun by two gentleman writers, as opposed to the rowdy longshoreman humor of "Sailor's Luck" which was scripted by two ladies! In any event, both of tonight's films provide an "instant" - if not definitive - look at romantic comedy before and after the Production Code. More importantly, they are films that were designed with nothing more in mind than entertaining their audiences and whiling away a pleasant hour or two. This they certainly still do.

--- "William K. Everson ---