"THE GREEN GODDESS" (Warner Brothers, 1929) Directed by Alfred E. Green
Screenplay by Julian Josekshon from the play by William Archer;
Camera, James Van Trees; 7 reels;
With George Arliss, Alice Joyce, Ralph Forbes, H.B. Warner, Ivan Simpson,
Reginald Sheffield, Betty Boyd, Miguel de Bruiller, David Tearle, Harry Semels

There is no attempt made to disguise the play origins of "The Green Goddess" and indeed in 1929 when 100% all-talkies were so much the vogue there would have been no reason to make such an attempt. Yet the quality of the theatre-oriented writing and acting, and the elegance of setting, are such that one might say that within its time period not adapted from stage hits. Arliss enjoyed total autonomy at Warners, with the freedom to handpick cast and crew and supervise production in every way. Purely as a vehicle for him, the film is one of his best. He is witty and menacing by turn, cultured at the drop of a handkerchief, lecherous at the turn of an ankle. And though he plays an Indian Rajah, he is able to play his stock-in-trade - the cultured Britisher - by playing in contemptuous parody of them. Above all, he permits himself the luxury of baskin in his own reflected glory; with every glint of those eyes, every measured movement, every line, he tells the audience that he knows full well how great he is, and like a seasoned campaigner always pauses to let the effect sink in before pressing on to something else. His Rajah is hardly a brilliant piece of acting, but it is a brilliant projection of personality into the kind of theatrical bravura that has all but disappeared today. The deliberate theatrical quality of the film is one of its basic charms. No casual lines, no unimportant comment to build up atmosphere; every line has its place, either informing us of something we need to know in the shortest and most entertaining way possible, or calculated to leave us gasping - as with the final curtain line, which for the first time relieves us of doubt and confirms that the film (and play) has been tongue-in-cheek all along, this in addition to being one of the great curtain lines in theatre history. Even the groupings of actors has its theatrical emphasis, and the plot itself is grand old melodrama, yet tinged with such wit that it never seems really old-fashioned. Arliss's first version of the play had been done as a 1923 silent, with Alice Joyce and Ivan Simpson (the renegade) in the same roles they play here. Tonight's 1929 version uses several big scenes lifted from the six-year-old silent, and also makes effective use of some of the big sets from Michael Curtiz' "Noah's Ark". The last version of the play was a reworked 1943 "B" titled "Adventure in Iqra" with Paul Cavanagh in the Arliss role.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

"TOPAZE" (Rko Radio, 1932; released 1933) Directed by Harry D'Abbadié;
D'Arrast; produced by David O. Selznick; Associate Producer, Kenneth MacGowan; screenplay by Ben Hecht from an adaptation by
Benn W. Levy of the play by Marcel Pagnol; camera, Lucien
Andriot; Music, Max Steiner; 8 reels;
With John Barrymore, Myrna Loy, Albert Conti, Luis Alberni, Reginald Mason,
Jotyna Howland, Jackie Searle, Frank Heicher.

The mere three year gap between "The Green Goddess" and "Topaze" is its own commentary on how quickly Hollywood discarded the unvarnished theatricality of early talkies, and got back to sophisticated filmmaking again, using all the cinematic grammar that had been put into cold-storage with the coming of sound. It was said of Harry D'Arrast that he could photograph a telephone and make it a thing of beauty, and he goes one better here by imparting visual sophistication even to a Paris street urinal, while in the lovely shot of the chestnuts roasting you can almost smell the aroma mingling with the crisp morning air. In its decisions of when and when not to move the camera, in its use of close-ups, in its composition, it is full of self-confident technique, so assured that it never seems to display itself. Not until the montage sequences are we aware of any kind of technique for its own sake. Barrymore, admirably subdued, playing with both charm and poignancy, seems a perfect team-mate for the light-as-a-feather D'Arrast, and it is a pity indeed that they did not work on other Lubitschian delights as harmoniously as they did here, or as Barrymore and Alan Crosland had worked so well together on the tasteful costumes of the late 20's. Topaze was a D'Arrast's last film. For purely personal reasons (reasons of film-making, of which his films had all received critical and boxoffice approval), Hollywood no longer wanted him, and he exiled himself to Monte Carlo where he died just a year or two ago. "Topaze" was a fitting climax to just a few years of superlatively civilised and gentlemanly film-making, and perhaps his finest work. Despite the Steiner credit, the film has literally no music - but needs none, since it creates its own.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---