THE KING ON MAIN STREET (Paramount, 1925) Produced, directed and adapted for the screen by Monte Bell, from "The King", adapted by Lee Dietrichstein from the play by C.A. de Callavet, Robert de Flers and Emmanuel Arene; starring James Wagoner, Howard Criner, Douglas Bond; 5 other major parts; with Adolphe Menjou, Bessie Love, Greta Nissen, Edgar Norton, Oscar Shaw, Joseph Kilgour, with Lois Wilson as a guest extra in the hotel lobby scene. Piano Accompaniment by Stuart Oderman.

Reviews in 1925 considered "The King on Main Street" absolutely sure-fire, both on its own merits, and for the considerable Menjou following who could be sure that the urbane star was back in another tailor-made vehicle. The vague parallel with the much admired British Prince of Wales didn't hurt either. The film was a big commercial success, especially in the small towns where the idea of a European king with democratic ideas descending on Coney Island and New Jersey was very sympathetically received. The film is something of a mixture of two other silents, Mal St. Clair's "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter" (also with Menjou) and Lubitsch's "The Student Prince", and with certain similarities too to Chaplin's "A King in New York".

A smooth, well-photographed and sophisticated comedy, it has a few surprises; some tantalising near-vamping by Greta Nissen, and a really charming and appealing performance by Bessie Love. A real bonus is Miss Love's spirited rendition of the Charleston, which prompted "Theatre magazine" in January of 1926 to remark "... it is memorable ... for the fact that Bessie Love gives a perfect exhibition of the Charleston, proving that it can be danced with extreme grace and agility, and yet without a single hint of wriggling vulgarity".

"The King on Main Street", with its pleasing performers, its authentic New York, New Jersey and Coney Island locations (it was made at Paramount's Astoria, Long Island Studios) is so enjoyable that one hates to be unduly critical, but alas it never does quite fulfill its promise. Its plot always proceeds in a simple direct line, without the subtle detours that Mal St. Clair would have provided. It certainly doesn't have the wit that Lubitsch or (later) Preston Sturges would have given it, and this is especially lacking in the climax, which is rather too bland and somehow minus real bite and poignancy. However, the flood-gates for this kind of sophisticated fare had been unlocked only the year before by Lubitsch's "The Harriague Circle", and the many native American directors with talents in the Lubitsch manner, had only just been presented with a market and an outlet for these talents, and were still exploring new territory. However, there is a great deal in "The King on Main Street" to be entertained by, not least the king's first encounter with a Coney Island hot dog. Democratically, he takes a bite - but then very sensibly discards it! Monte Bell achieved his best results in slight sophisticated films of this nature. He didn't specialise, but handled - competently - anything he was given, ranging from Garbo's first American film "The Torrent" to his last in 1945, a monogram B-plus called "China's Little Devils". It always seemed to me that he was a talented but much less inspired and talented director than Mal St. Clair, Herbert Brenon, Larry Harrost or Lubitsch, whose style developed. However, the late George Patterson, Canadian critic and authority, disagreed and once wrote: "Originally considered a pupil of Lubitsch, he got a great critical reception for his first film "Broadway After Dark" with Menjou and Norma Shearer, which contained a classic scene of Menjou as a bon-vivant bachelor sitting in his tub sailing little paper boats made out of letters from his various amours! Another Shearer vehicle that was a failure was "Lady of the Night" in which he was accused of aping von Sternberg. Very much his best film, and one that I cannot understand being so forgotten, was "The Snob" ... then there was John Gilbert and Jeanne Eagels in the very interesting "Han Woman and Sin" ... to me he always seemed one of the best and most individual silent directors, and one notable for his easy, relaxed and naturalistic style, his humorous and compassionate knowledge of human nature, and his disdain for the conventional methods of plot development or climax building".

"The King on Main Street" was never considered one of Bell's best works, but far too many of his silents are either non-existent or non-available, and in their absence it is at least an enjoyable guide to his easy-going style. Incidentally, originally the film had a Technicolor sequence. Our print has no such finery, and physically is a bit ragged in spots, but it is an original amber-toned print, with more sparkle and life in it than most of us can hope to retain when we reach its age.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---
THE FRONT PAGE (United Artists-Caddo Corp., 1930; released 1931) Directed by Lewis Milestone; produced by Howard Hughes; Screenplay by Bartlett Cormack and Charles Lederer from a play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur; Camera, Glen MacWilliams;

Last theatrically shown in the mid-30's, and never shown on television, "The Front Page", one of the major films of the early sound era, has long been inaccessible. Its availability now is due to a brace of reasons: one, the expiration of the rights held by the Howard Hughes organization, and two, the diligence of the American Film Institute in tracking down and making the film. A composite which, despite some sound problems in the first couple of reels, is quite satisfactory and in any event is almost certainly the only print that will be available from this point on.

The astonishing pace and fluidity of this movie will perhaps be most apparent to those who really know the ponderous and measured pace of so many 1930 movies, but even without such comparative considerations, it holds up superbly well - both as a piece of bitingly written theatre that has been brilliantly directed, was at this time very much under the influence of Russian film-makers, and it is a decidedly "formal" movie - shots well composed, individual cutts carefully thought out, the editing rhythmic (viz the reactions of the reporters intercut with the testing of the gallows, or the complicated sequence of Hildy's farewell, with constant intercutting of opposing and tracking subjective shots). Apart from these elements, Milestone's own particular visual trademark - the long, smooth, lateral tracking shots - are well in evidence throughout.

Comparison with Howard Hawk's 1939 remake "His Girl Friday" (with the sexes very neatly transposed) is inevitable, and for once neither version really suffers by such comparison. There is no question that the original is by far the better film, its characters real flesh and blood people as opposed to the cardboard figures of the remake. Yet "His Girl Friday" is indeniably funnier; it downplays some of the political undertones, creates a frenzied pace primarily through its handling of actors and its non-stop overlapping dialogue, and some hilarious new dialogue has been added. Too, some of the supporting casting is much better: Clarence Kolb and Gene Lockhart are the corrupt politicians are much subtler and funnier figures than James Gordon and Clarence Wilson here, and the character of Finchus (Slim Summerville in the first version) was notably expanded to provide a less realistic but again funnier showcase for Billy Gilbert. The rest of the casting, though conventional, was thoughtful too - Edwin Maxwell being a particularly good choice to succeed Gustav von Seyffertitz. John Qualen's convicted murderer role however was expanded via a lengthy death-cell scene that made him more sympathetic; in the original "The Front Page" was rather more gutty since George E. Stone plays him far less attractively, and thus his use as a political pawn about whom nobody really cares, is much more exploitable.

If the 1939 version toned down some of the political comment, it emphasized other aspects that were then more topical - the "Red Menace" fee example - and included some remarkably risque dialogue for a still Code-dominated industry, even though some of the pressures were being relaxed in 1939.

Both films, of course, have a major place in film history; "His Girl Friday" tended to be de-emphasized in some quarters merely because its verisimilitude was removed the original from view, so that both are available now which can be viewed on its own terms - and doubtless the critical guns will be turned on Billy Wilder's current remake. (Wilder would have been an ideal director for it some 20 years ago; now one wonders, but at least it'll be interesting to see. The recent critical and public acceptance of "The Front Page" as a play in revivals in London and New York at least indicates that nobody should feel that it needs updating or changing).

Lewis Milestone is a curious director who would turn out a blockbuster every six years or so ("The General Died at Dawn", "Of Home and Men") and in between satisfy himself with rather ordinary adaptations of the style of other directors, most notably Lubitsch who was his initial model in such late 20's comedies as "The Garden of Eden". Basically Milestone is a rather heavy-handed director, and his best films have been those, like "Of Home and Men", which had psychological plot content to match a heavy directorial style.

1930 was undoubtedly his best single year, with "All Quiet on the Western Front" being immediately followed by "The Front Page" for a director who started as an editor on Rin Tin Tin adventures, Milestone has done rather well through the years.  --- William K. Everson ---