"The Road is Open Again"

We usually keep our shorts as surprises, but this one perhaps needs a little explanation. It's one of the many propaganda sugar-coated-with-entertainment shorts made by the industry in the 30's and 40's, and especially by the Warner Brothers. The Warners were notorious EDR boot-lickers (the less obliquely inclined would have a far more indecorous vulgarity) right through the 30's and 40's, and this is one of their most heart-felt outbursts. While the hard-sell propaganda is somewhat outdated, the basic message—concerning the economy in a depression era—is woefully topical. The premise is that Dick Powell singing an upbeat song is some compensation for his relatively brief appearance in the Arliss film. The ghosts of former U.S. presidents are presented in off-beat fashion by Samuel S. Hinds (much warmer than Wilson ever was), Charles Middleton (although he had played Lincoln on other occasions, he is undoubtedly better known as that other noted head of state, Ming the Merciless) and most surprisingly, Alan Dinehart, who manages to make George Washington look like the president and co-man that was Dinehart's stock in trade. A second, quite brief short will follow—questionably charming Red Cross appeal from the early thirties in which Shirley Temple and co-star assure us that the shots of newspaper men are of real, honest-to-goodness trouble. Don't be alarmed, there will be no collection.

"GOD'S GIFT TO WOMEN" (Warner Brothers, 1931) Directed by Michael Curtiz Scenario by Raymond Griffith and Joseph Jackson from the play "The Devil Was Sick" by Jane Hinton; Camera, Robert Kurlie; 71 minutes


A film such as this virtually defies a program note. We are certainly under no illusions about it being an important film, and it depends for its success or failure on that eternal unpredictable, audience response. An old-fashioned Frankie bedrock farce, it can (and has) come beautifully to life—or it could just lay there, as it has lain unseen in vaults for years. Even in that dire eventuality however, there are compensations. After a slowish start, it moves quite quickly; with the funny line here and the black-comedy situation there. There's a particularly musical score (and a good deal of fancy art-deco trappings of the period. Most of all of course, there are the women: Laura La Plante, charmingly self-reliant and almost aggressive yet tastefully feminine too, Joan Blondell (iningerie again) and most of all, the exquisite Louise Brooks —wasted, but delightful, with a relaxed and bubbling sense of humor, and one truly stunning closeup. Curtis was never a writer, nor able to reshape or enlarge inadequate scripts, so he can't make more of the women than the script allows—except visually, and there he treats them very handsomely indeed. His tendency to leave players alone and undisturbed at their best, the way Frank Fay, a blessing to some, a puzzle to others. Like Harry Langdon, he was great with actors, his and his nonchalant style means some very funny lines are almost thrown away. Alan Howgrave however, ensures that this doesn't happen to his lines! All in all, a forgettable but enjoyable frolic, healthily vulgar and agreeably short. Eastman House directors will enjoy Charles Winninger's frequent references to the joys—strictly moral ones, apparently—of Rochester!

Ten Minute Intermission

"THE KING'S VACATION" (Warner Brothers, 1933) Directed by John Adelfi Scenario by Ernest Pascoel and Maude Powell; playas Pascoel; Camera, James Van Trees; 60 minutes Art Director, Anton Grot


It's incredible to think of George Arliss—a surprisingly big boxoffice star as well as a prestige name—appearing in a film that runs only an hour. But the story only needs that time to run its course, and is not padded; one of the joys of these early Warner Brothers programmers is their flexibility and non-conformity in terms of length. Curtiz' 1932 "Alas the Doctor" is a breezy 54 minutes, a stylistic gem, as you'll see next Spring. And brevity does not suggest a hurriedly-made, the King's Vacation is an unusually lush and handsome production, permitting Arliss to strut through a maximum number of elaborate sets in a number of uniforms and costume changes. Most of all, though it's a warm, touching, thoroughly charming film—comfortably predictable after a while, yet never totally so, and with an ending that manages to be satisfying without suddenly changing good guys into bad guys as so many films of this type did when they wanted a quick, neat conclusion. The sentiment is as simple as the recurring use of "Drink To Me Only" as theme music. Minor Arliss perhaps, but one of his most enjoyable. Incidentally, Anton Grot's art direction provides at least two stunning glass-shots; the opening establishing shot of the palace, and the latter palace exterior, when Arliss meets his wife. The format of glass shots has often been discussed in our post-screening sessions; here are two excellent examples.