Neither of tonight's almost never shown early Cagney were ever officially "lost", although "Sinners' Holiday" presented problems until a few years ago in that the sound only existed on the original discs, and had to be transferred on to track. However, exhibitor reluctance to show either film is at least understandable: on a purely commercial level, "Sinners' Holiday" is a rather primitive production, while "He Was Her Man" is too lacking in traditional Cagney action to make it a useful revival proposition. But if the interest vested in both films is dominantly historical and academic, at the same time they're not at all devoid of quite substantial entertainment values.

"Sinners' Holiday" (a pointless and even meaningless title) was the first film for both Cagney and Blondell, brought to Hollywood to repeat their roles from the Broadway stage. In some ways it is a tacky production: the sets are clearly artificial and economical, but not in a stylised way - as they would have been had Anton Grot handled the art direction, or as similar sets were in a similar film, 1947, "The Gangster". Directorially and photographically (poor John Stobely is not well made-up or photographed) and certainly historically it is a rather bland film, all of which serves to focus attention more and more on the Cagney performance. In his very first film, so much of the Cagney acting style - and the character ingredients are already there; the nervous energy, the movements of head and body, the highlights of shrill neurosis, even the mother-fixation which reached such a spectacular highlight in "White Heat". In view of the dynamic quality of the Cagney performance, it's hard to understand why he wasn't exploited immediately, yet three more lesser roles were still to come before he was positively established with "The Public Enemy". (Robinson's career however was even further protracted in its development). The power of the Cagney performance is admittedly strengthened by the weakness of Grant Withers, totally incapable of making the sentimental dialogue sound honest and convincing; potentially a star of promise in the late 30s, he was here very much on the way out as a major star, and was soon a reliable hero in Bs and serials, and later a more effective actor in matrity as a heavy. Evalyn Knapp as always is pretty and sometimes touching, but never more, while Luella La Verne is fascinating to watch and listen to, even if her role doesn't make a great deal of sense. The dialogue is often pithy and snappy, and the strong lines directed against - or emanating from - the mother are colorful if nothing else. The about-face to a happy ending is a little hard to accept when after harsh words, disrupted relationships and real tragedy, all is forgotten when a little money turns feeling into the penny arcade again! The print is an extremely good one, given the occasionally harsh sound, and Erno Rapee's musical credit must be the easiest he ever earned, since there isn't a note of music in the film other than for the wheezing notes of a calliope here and there.

10 Minute Intermission

HE WAS HER MAN (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by Lloyd Bacon; screenplay by Tom Buckingham and Mien Busch from a story by Robert Lord; camera, George Barnes; Art Director, Anton Grot; editor, George Amy; 7 reels. With James Cagney, Joan Blondell, Victor Jory, Frank Craven, Harold Huber, Pat Collins, Sara Padden, Russell Hopton, Raife Harold, James Eagles, John Quallen, Bradley Page, George Chandler, Samuel S. Hinds, Willard Robertson, Lee Shumway, Dennis O'Keefe, Sidney Bracey, Gino Corrado.

Coming midway between "Jimmy the Gent" and "Here Comes the Navy", "He Was Her Man" was the last small or programmer level Cagney. Even though a mere three years or so after "Sinners' Holiday", the differences are apparent. The credit-portraits (despite some incredible spelling errors) show us right away that Cagney and Blondell have been given the Hollywood treatment in its positive sense; Blondell was even married to the film's cameraman which certainly didn't hurt either. As soon as the film starts, and even though it is not a film calling for spectacular or even unusual sets, one is made aware (if only by comparison with the earlier film) of what a major contribution Anton Grot's art direction was to the Warner machine. The film can be either a major surprise or a major disappointment - or perhaps both at the same time. It is certainly a curious film, very low-key, almost a film noir, basically un-melodramatic, somewhat honest and towards the end, quite touching. The less one says in advance the more likely it is to be a very pleasant surprise.

William K. Everson