"I Sell Anything" is a typical, though not disastrous, example of the advisability of re-screening everything before assuming that old impressions are still valid. Virtually all of the films booked to these series are pre-screened before scheduling. In the case of "I Sell Anything", a 25-year-old recollection of the film was still relatively vivid; all of these little Warner comedies seem to weather the years well, Pat O'Brien and Ann Dvorak are likeable performers, and Robert Florey a stylish and reliable director. However, that 25-year-old impression was gained prior to exposure, or re-exposure, to some of the very best and snappiest Warner comedies of the same period: "Jimmy the Gent", "High Pressure", "Satisfied Event", "The Dark Horse" and so many others that we've run over the past ten years. In comparison with them, it is sub-standard; but it is hardly fair to criticise a film that does so exactly what it sets out to do - providing a diverting and fast-moving 70 minutes of fun. The structure of the plot may be ultra-familiar, but the concentration on a fast-talking auctioneer as the protagonist is not, and if some of the auction sequences run a little too long, then the novelty of the situation and the expertise of Pat O'Brien's non-stop patter certainly compensate. There are some good bits of dialogue, the misses Dvorak and Donat are charming as always, and the whole film is certainly an amusing trifle. That excellent director of above-average B's, Robert Florey, never seemed to do his best work at Warners however (apart from a handful of meticulously-crafted "A" films in the 40's). Somehow he was much too much of an individualist to subordinate himself to the team-work crews at Warners, or to benefit from that particular system. For better, and more recognisable as Florey films, were the expert little thrillers that he made at Paramount later in the 30's.

Ten Minute Intermission

A SLIGHT CASE OF MURDER (Warner Brothers, 1938) Directed by Lloyd Bacon
Produced by Hal B. Wallis; Associate Producer, Sam Bischoff; Screenplay by Earl Baldwin and Joseph Schrank from a play by Damon Runyon and Howard Lindsay; Camera, Sid Hickox; 85 minutes.

Most attempts to put Damon Runyon on the screen - and there were many in the thirties and forties - failed rather badly. Runyon's strange kind of whimsy, which made him a sort of Andy Warhol of the underworld, was as elusive as Garbo. Most attempts of his work tended to shift gears into excessive sentiment or heavy-handed lampoon (e.g., "Butch Minds the Baby"), and most damaging of all, his short, sharp stories were padded to stretch them to feature length. Oddly enough, "A Slight Case of Murder" succeeds where Runyon himself failed; he wasn't able to adapt his story to the theatre, and as a play this story was not markedly successful; transformed into a film, it is a marked improvement on Runyon's original and thus perhaps the definitive screen Runyon. (Curiously, the most authentically Runyon-esque movies - "Blood Money", "Boulevard Through a Keyhole" - were not based on Runyon stories!) "A Slight Case of Murder" bypasses all the obvious chances for laughs: it plays everything straight, underplays its best lines, and in so doing, as a black comedy, achieves much of the subtlety that "Arsenic And Old Lace" had on stage, but lost when transformed into a more frenetic movie. Robinson and the whole Warner team are a delight and never put a foot wrong - especially in the highlight sequence of the discovery of the bodies, and the delightfully off-hand discussion of the best way to "distribute them. One only has to look at the appallingly heavy-handed 1932 remake, "You're Killing Me" (with Broderick Crawford) to appreciate the kind of grace - and the word is not inappropriate - that this film possesses. Incidentally, if Robert Florey (on "I Sell Anything") is an example of a first-rate director unable to function at his best under the Warner system, then conversely Lloyd Bacon is an example of a fairly routine director who did first-class work under that same system (this film, "42nd Street") but depended on that system so much that what they took from us (as per his 40's films at Fox) he functioned much less dynamically.

William K. Everson