CHANGE OF HEART (Fox, 1934) Directed by John Blystone
Screenplay by Sonya Levien, Samuel Hoffenstein and James Gleason from "Manhattan Love Song" by Kathleen Norris; Camera, Joseph Alten; Art Director, Jack Otterson; a Winfield Sheehan production; 74 minutes

"Change of Heart" is exactly what it was intended to be - a pleasant, time-killing romantic comedy-drama, intended primarily to keep two slipping but still important stars busy while they were still under contract, and to provide simultaneous exposure for two newer and increasingly important stars (Dunn and Rogers). Given its limited ambitions, it's a handsome little film, with solid sets and good photography, and a fine supporting cast. Everything is totally predictable and there are no surprises - other than, perhaps, the somewhat unsympathetic turn that the Ginger Rogers character takes, and that surprise is mainly attributable to the very different route her career was so soon to take. It's based on a novel by Kathleen Norris, who provided a remarkably prolific amount of filmic soap-opera fodder between 1920 and 1934. Despite the conventional formula, there are some unexpected bonus offerings. Gaynor and Farrell had now worked together so often that they had established a genuine on-screen rapport, and their performances here have a natural and relaxed quality that is most appealing, and enables them to underplay key scenes rather effectively because the audience knew them (in the eighth year as a team) as well as they knew each other.

The musical score is most enjoyable in its pleasantly old-fashioned way, there are some excellent location shots of an early 30's New York, and some flavorful period dialogue about the thrills and opportunities offered by New York. But, the wonder of the film is that it was filmed in fifteen hours! Most of the people in it are basically rather nice and pleasant too, a marked change from the 70's set-in-New York film! Quite unexpectedly, and certainly unintentionally, the most dramatic scene in the film is one where Janet Gaynor somewhat inexpertly shaves Charles Farrell. His beard is tough, it's a long scene, and she scrapes away while he talks continually. It's a nerve-shattering scene as is, and one can only be thankful that it was directed by John Blystone (silent Tom Mix westerns, Laurel & Hardy's "Blockheads") who was not an advocate of von Stroheim realism and presumably didn't insist on there being a real blade in the razor!

-- 10 minute intermission --

THE STRANGER'S RETURN (MGM, 1935) Directed by King Vidor
Screenplay by Phil Stong and Brown Holmes from the novel by Phil Stong; Camera, William Daniels. 88 minutes.

With Lionel Barrymore, Miriam Hopkins, Franchot Tone, Stuart Erwin, Irene Hervey, Beulah Bondi, Grant Mitchell, Ted Alexander, Allen Carlyle, Erville Alderson, Henry Hall, Joe Sawyer, Edmund Breese, Harry Holman.

There could hardly be a more striking contrast to "Change of Heart", which is swamped with incident and characters, and which is totally lacking in class and polish. The Vidor's production is very little of incident, but - and especially given MGM's star-conscious methods - is completely unpredictable. Since that is one of its greatest strengths, it would be unfair to say too much about it. It's a film that is rarely shown, and King Vidor - though he remembers it with affection - hasn't seen it since it was new, and is not sure in his own mind how good a film it still is. The rural stories of Phil Stong all came to the screen dominated by the differing styles of the stars and directors involved: "State Fair" (Henry King and Will Rogers) became more warm and humorous, "A Village Tale" was directed by John Cromwell with a stress on its "Feyton Place" theatrics, and here Vidor frequently cuts away to the land and the wheat farmers, underlining his oft-returned to thes of the importance and permanence of the soil. The rather abrupt editing and over-use of fadeouts suggest that it might originally have been a longer film, but 8 full reels is enough to tell its dramatic yet leisurely tale. Daniels' photography is excellent, and good back projection intrudes only once or twice, so that the flavor of the real outdoors rather than the studio prevails. Some of the best dialogue is seemingly extraneous, as in the charming scene the now country-"trapped" protagonists talk about Arliss' "Old English" and the great plays that they saw in the city. Biggest surprise of all is the strong, moving and attractive performance by Miriam Hopkins - that may represent a personal breakthrough, and deserves some very good performances in fine films. I have never - until this film - found her personally so interesting. It's good to have this long-missing Vidor back in circulation, and hopefully it will now get the renewed attention it deserves.

-- William K. Everson --

Program finishes tonight at 11:00. At that point there will be a brief discussion session.