SUCCESS AT ANY PRICE (Rko Radio, 1934) Directed by J. Walter Ruben
Screenplay by John Howard Lawson and Howard Green from the play "Success Story" by Lawson; Camera; Henry Gerrard, 75 mins.

While all films, to a degree reflect the times in which they are made, certain key films, especially when the dominant contributing artist is the writer rather than the director, become especially interesting as mirrors of their era. Sometimes that importance and interest transcend their individual status. As tonight's two films are linked in that both are somewhat sour views of the times, where two films were made in the depression, and the postWorld War Two period. The earlier depression films ("I Am A Fugitive From a Chain Gang") tended to be screams of outrage and protest; by 1948 however, it had become clear that the corner which prosperity lurked was still many blocks away. Films shifted gears somewhat, and romanticised the depression, kidded it, or as here, sullenly lambasted what is always ambiguously referred to as the system. It's a strange film, by virtue of its cast, pace and dialogue having all the earmarks of a Warner film of the period, yet lacking the humor that Warners would have injected, via Frank McHugh or Allen Jenkins, as an antidote. It was one of the later screenplays written by John Howard Lawson, and very much is based on his own quite well received play, it can be considered very much so a personal point of view. Lawson of course, as one of the "Unfriendly Ten", achieved some notoriety during the McCarthy era as an alleged Communist propagandist, and his career was aborted thereby. While one always tended to blame the artist for the mercy of the political witch-hunter, the suspicions concerning him were not entirely unfounded. His screen-writing career was not prolific, and was quite liberally dotted with war stories like "Blockade", "Counter Attack", "Sahara" and "Action in the North Atlantic", where the odd political lines could be slipped in casually. Apart from its underlying theme of revolution against the ruling classes as also is its own sake, there is no real Communist thrust to "Success at Any Price", but it is Chester Morris' role for which the film has become famous. While it may not be pro-Communist it is most certainly pro-anti-American at times; "Success at any Price" in any case, is a strong, powerful little picture with mature situations and dialogue, and a commendably unsympathetic performance from Douglas Fairbanks Jr. - quite a departure for him at a time when he was coming into his own as a very likeable young leading man. Genevieve Tobin is, as always, a straight and sophisticated, a perfectly understandable reason for anyone to leave the place. In the War role, Colleen Moore has practically a carbon copy of her role in the previous year's "The Power and the Glory", but she isn't kindly treated by the camera, or indeed by the writing of the role itself. And Frank Morgan, though in a (for him, at that time) stereotyped role, reminds us again what a good dramatic actor he was before MGM turned him into a comic buffoon.
The print, by the way, like many RKO Radio films - preserved only for TV use - is from a 35mm negative and rather soft. (You'll notice the difference when the crisp Warner print follows it). There's nothing one can do to remedy this, except to reduce the size of the image on screen (which would be more disconcerting than the soft focus) or to point out that the farther back you sit, the better it will look.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

TO THE VICTOR (Warner Brothers, 1948) Directed by Delmer Daves; Original story and screenplay, Richard Brooks; Produced by Jerry Wald; Camera, Robert Burks; Musical director, Leo Forbstein. 100 minutes

In 1948, "To The Victor" seemed both a courageous and an artistically daring film, and while to an extent that evaluation holds up, it's very possible that one's initial admiration for the film (or mine, anyway!) was prompted by everyone's seeming determination to suppress the film. Reviews on the whole were not good; the NY Times found it "confused" and "distasteful," and resisted a film with a black marketeer-hero and a collaborationist heroine. In Britain, reviews were much better, but that didn't make it easier to see. It had no London first-run and no circuit release; its "premiere" was at the somewhat out-of-the-way suburb of Golders Green.

Warners' rationale in making it is presumably they saw it as a prestige film. Their 1948 schedule was headed by a number of art-for-art's sake items ("The Treasure of the Sierra Madre", "Rope"), backed by a lot of light programmers and minor Dickens and, realising where the gaps lay, a big-scale program of releases of action pictures - gangster films, swashbucklers, westerns. To their credit, "To The Victor" is ambitiously more, with a great deal of location work in France, and there at no signs - not obvious ones anyway - of
post-production tinkering. Richard Brooks' literate script seems to have been left alone, even though it has some of the flaws of Preston Sturges scripts in allowing the actors to halt the narrative while they deliver speeches. (As his director, Sturges of course had no incentive to muffle Sturges the writer). Possibly Warners felt that, despite its occasionally pretentious quality, they had a post-war "Casablanca" on their hands here. But if so, commercially they muffed it. The degree of romanticism present in the World War II "Casablanca" was not present in this story; moreover, Warners didn't back their faith in the film to the extent of giving it a star of Bogart's artistic calibre. The cast for the most part is excellent, with character plays like Francen and Cianelli given a rare chance to shine in major roles, but Dennis Morgan just isn't up to the subtleties of his role, and plays it on entirely conventional and one-dimensional lines. Moreover, though popular, he wasn't a big enough name to give the film the boxoffice clout it needed.

While the film perhaps isn't as notable as it once seemed, at the same time the passage of years has given it additional elements of interest. For example, its milieu and characters pre-date Carol Reed's "The Third Man" by a year or so. Its pessimistic comments -- especially as voiced by the Francen character -- about World War Three -- even if the predicted all-out holocaust hasn't arrived, have added point today in the wake of Korea and Vietnam, and a certain surfacing of neo-Naziism. Its theme of moral regeneration anticipates a lot of later post-war films, particularly those from Europe and especially France.

It's an extremely handsome film (one of the earliest assignments of one of Hitchcock's favorite later cameramen), perhaps a trifle studied and formal in some places, but still one of the most beautiful film experiences of the year, and with an excellent matching between Hollywood and French footage. Even the back projection is unobtrusively used, and disguised by excellent art direction. As with most Warner films of the period, it's perhaps a little over-produced -- too much music, a little over-long. And there's a tendency to throw "names" into minor roles, which catches one a little off-balance. One expects Bruce Bennett and Dorothy Morson to have far more to do, though both are extremely good in their handful of scenes. However, as mentioned earlier, one of the real joys of the film is seeing those fine actors Victor Francen and Eduardo Cianelli in really good roles. Cianelli, always an excellent heavy here absolutely relishes (but does not overplay) his role, modelled very much along (alimser) Sydney Greenstreet lines -- even to giving Cianelli some typically Greenstreet dialogue. "I'm a man of infinite impatience" Cianelli purrs, as Dennis Morgan is about to be beaten up by one of his goons.

Delaire Davis, a former actor and screenwriter, turned to directing in the mid-40's. (His career as an actor and writer started in the late 20's). A man of taste, and with a strong pictorial flair, he directed some well varied and interestingly films, among them "Task Force", "The Red House" and "Broken Arrow". He died less than a year ago. Richard Brooks, currently back in the spotlight again via his writing-direction of "Looking For Mr. Goodbar", scripted some essentially rough and hard-bitten films in the 40's -- "Brute Force", "Night and the Victor", and "Key Largo" followed it -- but was not limited to that category. His "The Light Touch" (which he wrote and directed in 1952) was an utterly charming romantic comedy, Lubitschian in style, a sort of modern "Trouble in Paradise". But certainly his forte has always been stronger meat -- "The Blackboard Jungle", "Storm Warning", "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof", "Elmer Gantry", "In Cold Blood".

It was very easy, in the mid-40's (especially if one was young, and excitedly "discovering" film at every turn) to be misled by Hollywood films. They were glossy, literate, pretentious, often trying very hard to weld art into their commerce. Some of the films that seemed overwhelming then are merely pompous and self-conscious today. (While it's not a Hollywood film, I think that Carol Reed's "Odd Man Out" certainly fits into that category). But even if sometimes misguided, Hollywood was really trying in those post-war years to (a) hang on to its enormous wartime audience, and (b) to do so by upgrading its product and also and formalism in its screenwriting. "To the Victor" quite certainly rates an A plus for effort, and perhaps an A minus -- or a very strong B plus -- for actual achievement. Somewhere, in talking so much about its importance as a mirror to its time, we also forgot to mention that it is a most enjoyable and exciting melodrama as well.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 11.15

There is no program next week because of the Easter break; we resume on March 31 with I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING and THE CHALLENGE.

As a post-script to the note on "Success at any Price": we should have noted that the last 30 seconds represent a surprising and appalling "cop-out" -- one quite prevalent in similar situations in films of that period. Just try to block those few seconds out mentally!