As a prelude to (and filmed mid-way between) other loftier thespian activities, here with Bette Davis as a pitch-lady for General Electric, entering wholeheartedly into the business of plugging dishwashers. She's helped out by some standing Warner sets, and such contractees as Dick Powell, Warren William, Ruth Donnelly, Joan Blondell, Preston Foster and Walter Miller.

WAY BACK HOME (Rko Radio 1931; released: 1932) Directed by William A. Seiter
Produced by Pandro S. Berman; Screenplay by Jane Murfin, based on the radio characters created by Phillips Lord; Camera, J. Hoy Hunt; Music, Max Steiner; 80 minutes
With: Phillips Lord (Seth Parker); Effie Palmer (Ha Parker); E. Phillips Lord (The Man); Life Partner (Mary Lucy); Frank Albertson (David Clark); Bennett Kilpack (Cephus); Raymond Hunter (Captain); Oscar Apfel (Wobblin); Stanley Fields (Rufe Turner); Dorothy Petersen (Runway Rosie); Frankie Darro (Rbbie); Wade Boteler (Income Tax Man); and Lon Poff, Frank Darien.

"Way Back Home" was Bette Davis' fourth picture; she still had two more quickies (one for Columbia, "The Manace", and the independent "Hall House") to get out of the way before the role with George Arliss in "The Man Who Played God" that would get her career under way more seriously. It has never been revived, and it's not difficult to see why, though that shouldn't be taken as a blanket condemnation of the film. Obviously its sole commercial value today would be in the Davis name, and it's too primitive a film, and too lacking in the expected Davis dynamism, to be anything but unsatisfying to Davis devotees. On the other hand, not to show it for their benefit results in some frustration that is equally disappointing. Either way, the film just can't win - which is rather unfair, since it's a special kind of film, made for an audience that no longer exists. To be judged fairly at all, it has to be judged by the standards - and the audiences - of 1931, not at all an easy thing to do in 1978.

The original press reviews, aware of interest in the radio show and characters, were generally kind, but the trade press tore it apart. "Variety" for instance commented that the negative cost was $400,000, "...a lot of coin for a camp meeting on screen. As entertainment, the film is unbelievably bad.
That is a big budget for what emerges on screen, though probably the rights to the property are worth it. There are also signs of extensive revisions and reshaping. In a sense though, the film succeeds totally in what it sets out to do, namely to be an illustrated radio show. In that respect, it resembles the average contemporary television show, which is likewise only illustrated radio. Turn the picture off, and the TV show still tells its story entirely by words. The same thing applies to "Way Back Home" - it would be perfectly understandable if only the sound track was played. Not that it has no visual interest; William Seiter, a much under-rated director (he did last week's "Appointment For Love", although that hardly represents his best work), had been a notable silent director, sometimes much in the Griffith manner, and there are many visual Griffith touches in "Way Back Home". The opening establishing pan across the rural community is exactly like the opening to Griffith's "Way Down East", and frequently in exterior scenes, composition is approximated. But the kinds of things that he would add or improve upon when sizing up his locations, and while they help, they are not always related to the narrative. Phillips Lord probably had the same kind of "artistic control" on this film that Arliss had on his vehicles, and in this case, that meant sticking to the tried-and-true radio ingredients. The song-fests and the taffy-pulls and the barn dances do get a bit much at times, though mainly because they eat up so much footage that we'd rather see devoted to Miss Davis. Fortunately, while she doesn't get too many opportunities to shine, she is there all the way through, her lustre a little dimmed by the usual rather soft and underlit Rko tv print, but present nonetheless.

The relationships to "Way Down East" are more than casual -- indeed, the title seems a deliberate play inviting association with that classic, possibly also a desperate ploy since the film was originally known and even released as "Other People's Business". The characters and particularly the comedy relief seem patterned on "Way Down East", and as if aware of it, the villain at one point is given a line of dialogue making direct reference to the melodramatic climax of "Way Down East", though probably the rights to Miss Davis. From its opening "Turkey in the Straw" music to its exaggerated caricatures, the film is admittedly much too aggressively rural -- but this is probably due to the radio-orientation of Lord (who to my knowledge never made another film) and his cohorts.

The original and still official synopsis for the film is more complex (and suggests a far greater running time) than what actually emerged. Since Lord obviously didn't want to cut the weather reports or the cow-calling cowboys, or other rural aspects so beloved by his audience, the cuts were made in the scenes allocated to the movie actors. Oscar Apfel's final disposal seems vague and unmotivated, and there's a major change in the comeuppance extended to the main
villain, Stanley Fields. In the original, he was to have been killed by a trio; here he's merely clobbered with a Bible, a less decisive though possibly more embarrassing punishment. Too, the film seems to reach one climax, then lingers on to another. It does seem longer than it is. And it's quite certain a film that needs kindness and patience. But given that, it is quite a pleasing and certainly well-intended little film, by no means the chore to sit through that many references to it may have led you to believe. In this day and age too, it's rather reassuring to recall that 40 years ago there was an audience for this kind of film, and a big one. It was of course the same audience that warmed to Will Rogers. (For the record, in NY the film opened at the Mayfair.) In a perverse kind of way, one might consider "Way Back Home" a kind of prologue to Davis' 1939 "Beyond the Forest". One can well imagine that if Lucy here, happy to be a small-town girl, winding up as the Rosa of that later Vidor film, desperately frustrated and anxious to leave the small town for the big city. (Especially with a 20-year marriage to Frank Albertson in the interim).

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE GIRL FROM TENTH AVENUE (Warner Brothers–First National, 1935)
Directed by Alfred E. Green; Supervised by Robert Lord; Screenplay by Charles Kenyon from a play by Hubert Henry Davies; Camera, James Van Trees; Gowns by Orry-Kelly; 69 minutes NY opening: Capitol Theatre
With Bette Davis (Miriam Brady); Ian Hunter (Geoffrey Sherwood); Colin Clive (Marland); Alison Skipworth (Mrs. Martin); John Eldredge (Hugh Brown); Philip Reed (Tony Hewlett); Katherine Alexander (Valentine); Helen Jerome Eddy (Miss Mansfield); Gordon (Bill) Elliott (Desk clerk); Adrian Rooley (Marcel); Andre Oberon (Max); Edward McBride (Art Gallery clerk); and Mary Treeen, Brooks Benedict, Hainie Conklin, Edgar Norton.

Relatively speaking one of the last of Davis' short programmers for Warners, "The Girl From Tenth Avenue", though relatively familiar some 15 years ago, doesn't seem to be shown any more. In comparison with the primitive co-feature, it'll probably seem a lot better than it really is because of its slickness, style and typical Warner expertise. There's certainly no denying that, though within a very few years, Davis had made a tremendous impact. She was tremendously from Warner's star-building system, however much she decried their methods in later years. (Not that her complaints weren't justified; she was incredibly wasted, considering her proven ability and critical recognition of it.) "The Girl From Tenth Avenue" is really just soap-opera, but intelligently and stylishly done. It's almost an exact parallel to Ruth Chatterton's pre-Code "Anybody's Woman". In the earlier films, it was a moral code that provided the gulf, post-'33 it was social status -- a barrier that must have seemed particularly untenable to depression audiences. Had this been a more important film, there might well have been greater showcase opportunities, but Davis does rather well in creating her own. The night-club confrontation near the end could have been a block-buster scene (opposite Miriam Hopkins or Mary Astor) in a 40's movie, but even so Davis makes more of it than the script did. While the second confrontation, shortly thereafter, with Ian Hunter, is even more of a bravura scene. A 40's film would also have provided a more aggressive score: the relatively placid quality of the film is due at least in part to the comparatively spareness of a musical score. (Although a bonus is Colin Clive, as earnest and neurotic as though still playing Frankenstein, warbling a drunken chorus or two of "I'll String Along With You".)

Despite the title, the New York backgrounds are singularly sketchy. All in all though, it's a pleasant film, and tonight's combination does provide a rather impressive survey of the rapid strides in Davis' career over a mere four year period. In the fall, we'll be getting to one or two other elusive early Davis films, including "Housewife".

William K. Everson

The schedule for the Summer season will be printed on the back of next week's program notes. If you do not plan to be here next week, but would like a copy of the schedule, please drop me a postcard here at the School, before next Friday - or even better, provide a stamped addressed envelope for reply.

Program Ends: 10.55