With certain exceptions - usually involving the spectacular re-writing of the original, or the utilisation of a master craftsman like Ernst Lubitsch - use of plays by the silent screen usually did a disservice to the original material (deprived of its basic value, its dialogue) and to the silent film itself, which was capable of superb pictorialism and great subtlety. Moreover, tonight's prints - one a battered survivor, the other a new print which is a testimonial to the lack of loving care provided by today's laboratories - do not do justice to the film's original visual values. Hence, the utilisation of these films in our Archive Night slot, where they supplement one another and provide an interesting comparison of stage-to-screen problems in Britain and the U.S. in the mid-20's. By the way, a word of advice: the print of "The Vortex" is quite soft, and those who like sharp focus and sitting near the screen will have a problem! The further back you sit, the better the print will look.

THE VORTEX (Gainsborough: Britain, 1927) Directed by Adrian Brunel; produced by Michael Balcon; Screenplay by Eliot Stanard from the play by Noel Coward; 70 mins.

With: Ivor Novello (Mickey Lancaster); Willette Karnshaw (Florence Lancaster); Frances Doble (Sunny Mainwaring); Alan Rollis (Tom Verryan); Simon Stuart (David Lancaster); Kinsey Falle (Pamela Quintin); Julie Suerdo (Anna Wolloff); Dorothy Fane (Helen Saville)

US Premiere: August 1928; Fifth Avenue Playhouse.

1927 saw Britain introducing new playwrite Noel Coward's works to the screen with a vengeance. First came "The Queen Was in the Parlour", a co-production with UFA and a decidedly heavy production; next "Easy Virtue", directed by Hitchcock and shown here a few seasons back, and third and virtually on its heels, tonight's film, "The Vortex".

The British Film Catalogue describes the somewhat complicated plot of "The Vortex" in these no-nonsense terms: "Romantic: Youth discovers his fiancée is mistress of mother's lover.

Describing such a tale as a romance is not so much an example of British understatement as it is an illustration of the British ability to look on the bright side no matter what the circumstances. And failing to mention that the family is also enroiled in such un-chic activities as drug-taking is perhaps also an illustration of the British traditional lack of showmanship.

Made by one of the more adventurous (but somehow never very successful) British directors, Adrian Brunel, who tried via such films as "The Man Without Desire" to bring German expressionism into British films long before it was fashionable, and who later directed Keaton's one British sound feature, "The Vortex" is a curiously flat version of the Coward play, Hitchcock, adapting "Easy Virtue" for the same company just a month or two earlier, got far more drama, and certainly far more sense of cinema, out of much less promising material. In fact, "Easy Virtue" seems to be several years later than "The Vortex" instead of a month or two earlier. Nor does "The Vortex" hold a candle to Lawrence Brown's 1921 Hollywood film "Shadows of the Past", which likewise managed to be thoroughly cinematic while telling a not dissimilar (in relationships, if not in content) triangle story. One major problem of "The Vortex" it is wholesale lifting of both dialogue and even stage directions from Coward and translating them into titles. This is unavoidable of course, yet it results in a superficial and light-hearted approach without the dramatic undercurrents that the frivolity must have had on stage. When the film goes wholly dramatic in its last third, the switch is just too sudden. The title "You cad!" followed a few seconds later by Coward's supreme insult "You stinker cad!" almost invites levity, though spoken, and in the right context, it probably worked quite well.

Ivor Novello always seemed doomed to remain somewhat in Coward's shadow, though he achieved remarkable popular success on the London stage in the 30's and 40's with a series of romantic operettas. His acting appearances in silent film - including "The White Rose" for Griffith - offered a striking variety of roles, but most directors, probably bowing to his wishes, seemed inclined to over-favor close shots stressing his handsome features. More than once in "The Vortex" Novello contrives to turn his head slowly to look in the opposite direction, so that we get two profiles in the same shot.

Despite the gentile treatment, "The Vortex" has some fairly strong meat in it, and changes from the play are relatively minimal. One or two incidents are re-arranged in time; the big denunciation - and explanation of the title - is rather curiously taken away from Novello and given to a lesser character; but the only major change is a tacked-on optimistic ending. The original climax with the hero's denunciation of his mother, followed by his abandonment of her. Although the battered print hardly does them justice, some of the interior art-deco sets are elaborate, and the film as a whole is an interesting curiosity, and if nothing else, illustrative of the period when Britain - the finanes of the film industry bolstered somewhat by new government laws - was also allowed to escape the blatant imitation of Hollywood and succeeding - through new directors like Hitchcock, Lean and Welles - and the work of writers like Coward - to establish its own national identity in film.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---
THE FIRST YEAR (Fox, 1925; released 1926) Directed by Frank Borsage; Scenario by Frances Marion from the 1921 play by Frank Craven; Camera, Chester Lyons; Asst. Director, Bunny Dunn; 70 min. With: Matt Moore (Tom Tucker); Kathryn Perry (Grace Livingston); John Patrick (Tuck Loring); Frank Currier (Dr. Livingston); Frank Cooley (Mr. Livingston); J. Farrell MacDonald (Mr. Barstow); Margaret Livingston (Mrs Barstow); Virginia Madison (Mrs Livingston); Carolynne Snowden (Hattie)

"The First Year" was a fabulously successful and long run play when it first hit Broadway, achieving the kind of reviews - and public response - attributed today to Neil Simon shows. However, it was relatively late being transferred to the screen, by which time its newsworthiness and topicality had evaporated a little. It is a curiously anachronistic film thereby, lacking the immediacy of - say - "Skinner's Dress Suit", another 1925 marital comedy about newly-weds and getting ahead in business. Its juxtaposition with more up-to-date jazz age fare is underlined by a credit informing the audience that it is from Fox's special unit for "Clean American Productions"! (One wonders whether the studio maintained a direct opposite number somewhere across the tracks). Coming right after Borsage's "Lazy Bones" (and probably made quickly, wholly in the studio, after the more ambitious location-shooting of that lovely film), one's expectations for "The First Year" are high - not least because the original reviews were exceptionally good, stressing both its fidelity to the original play, and also the humanistic touches that Borsage inserted throughout. Those "touches", it must be admitted, are not as clear-cut as in other Borsage films, but it's a very gentle film, and Borsage's insertions are often almost subliminal, so it may well be that they need music and an audience response to bring them out fully.

"The First Year" does at times seem a little too faithful to the form and content of the play, and only when it "opens up" - as in the rainstorm sequence where the wife is unwittingly abandoned - does it take on a more spontaneous quality. On the other hand there's real (if subtly hidden) film technique in the dinner party sequence, where expert timing, pantomime and adroit editing make it as funny as it might have been on stage. It's also a timeless sequence, as topical today as then, which is another reason why it works as well.

Its one major drawback is no fault of the play or of Borsage's direction. The hero, as played by Matt Moore (always the least interesting of the three Moore brothers) is frankly dull and a bit exasperating, and quite undeserving of the devotion of the charming Kathryn Perry. However, it's good to have another lost Borsage back among us, though surprisingly - although it was rescued and preserved some seven years ago - it doesn't seem to have gotten into circulation, and even the Museum of Modern Art has never played it. The print was made from Fox's own mint condition 35mm nitrate original, and should have been almost as crystal-clear and stunning to look at as that original, alas it isn't. It's adequate and no more, recording the content of the film, but certainly not its original look. The film was quite faithfully remade as a 1932 talkie, with William K. Howard directing, and Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell co-starring, with Leila Bennett cast as Hattie the maid.

William R. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:00 p.m.

Please note that as I am away for these last two programs, screenings will start promptly at 7:30 without introductory comments.

The Summer schedule will be issued next week. If you will not be attending but would like a copy, just send me a postcard c/o the New School and one will be mailed to you. Wke