THE MAYOR OF HEll (Warner Brothers, 1933) Directed by Archie Mayo; Screenplay by Edward Chodorov from an original story by Ibsen Auster; Camera, Barney McGill; With: James Cagney, Madge Evans, Dudley Digges, Allen Jenkins, Frankie Darro, Dorothy Peterson, Farina, John Marston, William V. Mong, Charles Wilson, Hobart Cavanaugh, Robert Barrat, Raymond Borzage, Pat Collins, Mickey Bennett, Arthur Byron, Sheila Terry, Harold Huber, Edwin Maxwell, Sidney Miller, George Humsht, Gates McFadden, and Maurye Brebner. The film was a box office hit, Wilfred Lucas, Ben Taggert, Bob Perry, Charles Sullivan, Syd Saylor. 90 mins.


More than any other company, Warners constantly remade their old films, sometimes openly, often much disguised, sometimes just as "B's and shorts. Tonight's two films are sufficiently different in structure and content for their pairing to avoid undue repetition — though also too similar for there to be any justification for avoiding the writing credits of the second for making no acknowledgement of the writers of the first!

Both films were made to help a transition period in the careers of their stars. Cagney was a major star in 1935, and made five films that year, but Warners were having problems in cutting him loose from his crime and villain image, and yet at the same time they also wanted to get the action image that had made him, and had fewer but bigger pictures was the ultimate answer, but not until 1935. Bogart was not nearly as big a star when he made "Crime School" in 1938, but he had great potential, and Warners didn't quite know how to handle him. He had made his mark in crime and gangster films, although his output was more varied than is today generally remembered. Warners presumably hoped he might follow the same route as Gable, and his three pictures prior to "Crime School" had all presented him in light and mostly sympathetic roles. Here he's very much of a hero — but the crime background is brought back. But his next five films would return him to crime and villainy with a vengeance, and the oasis of "Dark Victory" apart, so would most of the bigger films that followed until he achieved major stardom in the early 40's. Actually neither Cagney nor Bogart are pivotal figures in tonight's two films, and they represent a kind of marking time period for both of them.

Undoubtedly "The Mayor of Hell" is the more important film for Warners, and the better one. It received some unfounded reviews at the time, but mainly because it was compared with the Russian "The Road to Life" of the same period, and other Warner "social" films, when really it had few such aims. It's an untidy film in some ways. In order to cater to the Cagney image, an element of gangsterism is brought into the film, and also renders the Cagney character somewhat unbelievable. There is just no motivation for his altruism. Nor does the elegant and lady-like Madge Evans seem well cast as a reform school nurse (though without doubt she must have had a good effect on the inmates' morale) Somewhere along the line it might have been realised that the elegant lady from MGM was slumming at Warners, and a line of dialogue almost saying as much was inserted into the film. The role was originally slated for Fay Wray but both of them decided to work elsewhere. Presumably it is Barbara Stanwyck, Claire Dodd and Marian Marsh were tied up too, necessitating the borrowing of Miss Evans. It's always a pleasure to watch her, but through no fault of her own, she does provide an incongruous note.

The awkward construction of the film gives Cagney a late entrance, and also keeps him off-screen for a period towards the end. On the other hand, the film has many assets, including some choice villainy from Dudley Digges, and a vivid climax with a photographic style resembling that of an annexation of a war-time period photo. It's certainly less clear than the remake too: Cagney is as much opportunist as crusader, and the casual acceptance of the villain's death — with no punishment meted out — certainly would not have been accepted in the post-1933 days of a rigid Production Code.

Though more orthodox, "Crime School" can boast some improvements over the original. The total elimination of the gangster element, while making the hero a more two-dimensional character, does at least render the film a more coherent unit, which can make it a more valid comparison to its predecessor. The cast is weakened, but the roles are cut down to size in the original with Frankie Darro's part enlarged to that of Billy Halop's here, it would have been a much better picture). Unlike most Warner remakes it is not padded, but the elimination of the gangster stuff allows for more time and more incident in developing the reform school milieu, and this pays off very well. Alas, the Dead End Kids are as obnoxious as ever, totally unworthy of the reform efforts on their behalf, and quite lacking the sympathy and conviction of the kids in the first film. However, they were of considerable boxoffice importance in 1938, and even without top billing (Bogart! Much of the original incident and even identical dialogue is dully worked into the new film, though there is only one actual shot lifted from the first film, George Offerman Jr. does time in both pictures however, in virtually the same role. — William K. Everson —