SPELLBOUND (Pyramid-United Artists, 1946) Directed by John Harlow; Produced by R.Harney-Lease; Screenplay by Miles Malleen from the novel "The Necromancers" by Robert Hugh Benson; Camera, Walter Harvey; Guest, Guy Green; eventually retitled "Passing Clouds" in England; released in the U.S. in 1945 by PRC under the title "The Spell of Amy Autten," and cut to 63 mins; Our print tonight is of the original 82 minute version.

With: Derek Farr, Vera Lindsay, Frederick Leicester, Ray Patrice, Felix Aylmer, M.G. Ray, Diana King, Gibb Malaughlin, Marion Spencer, Norman Shearer, Joyce Redman, Winifred Davis, Mildred Natwick, Cameron Hall, Irene Handl, Stafford Millear.

When "Spellbound" was released in England late in 1940 it created something of a stir, though only a temporary one. The war, and major films coming out of the war, soon caused it to be forgotten. (Although it was reissued later, the reissue was not in response to any kind of audience demand, but only because it was an independent film on which the initial distribution contract had expired, and its owners hoped to see a little more money from it. The title was changed of course to avoid confusion with the Hitchcock movie of 1944.) At the time however, it was considered an unusual and intelligent film, and the best to date - perhaps even the first - to deal seriously with the theme of spiritualism. In retrospect, it can also be seen as perhaps the vanguard of many British (and American) wartime films to deal seriously and/or philosophically with the theme of death.

In a very loose sense, it has much the same kind of plot as "The Exorcist," but while it has its eerie moments, it quite certainly is not a horror film, nor are its melodramatic highlights really exploited for suspense. Indeed, in a melodramatic sense, the climax is even a little flat. Today especially, after great films like "Dead of Night" and "The Uninvited," and scores of "exorcists" and "ghosts" with their sequels and rip-offs, it seems quite a tame film - yet it still has a certain power and sobriety which makes it worth seeing. It was certainly a courageous enterprise for a group of independent film-makers, although one must admit too that a little more compromise could have made more out of it. John Harlow was never more than an efficient director of Bs and programmers; his best films were undoubtedly this one and rather coincidentally "The Dark Tower," the British remake of tonight's co-feature "The Man With Two Faces." Miles Malleen, the screenwriter, was likewise far from a subtle writer (or actor) and his major subtlety in this film was in not writing himself in a nice juicy part, as he usually did. Undoubtedly it could have been a better film with stronger talent involved -- but then stronger talent wouldn't have been available (or affordable) for this kind of independent feature. In any case, it's a commendably off-beat little film and really needs no such apologies. American distribution was very sparse, and it was not afforded a New York first-run.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE MAN WITH TWO FACES (Warner Brothers-First National, 1934) Directed by Archie Mayo; Screenplay by Tom Reed and Mivan Rust from the play "The Dark Tower" by George S.Kaufman and Alexander Woollcott; Camera, Tony Gaudio; 72 mins.


Although it had an relatively recent exposure on cable tv here in NY, "The Man With Two Faces" has had only one other exposure in NY in the past 30 years, and that one buried in a big MGM retrospective of Warner films some years back. In a way it's easy to see why the play has no especial reputation, it's not one of the more dynamic Robinson vehicles, and most especially, it has such distasteful plot elements (and this is not said critically) that it doesn't have the "fun" aspect of the average old Warner film. The dialogue is good, often vicious and/or cynical, but it doesn't have the spark or the virility of a "Five Star Final" or a "Blazed Event." The two screenwriters are certainly first-rate writers too, but one suspects that they have tightened the play up just a little too much. There is so much early dialogue exposition about events that took place before the story opens that it's little difficult to get oriented, and it's only with the entrance of Louis Calhern - one of the slickest villains ever, making even Robert Barret in "The Rham Murder Case" seem a thoroughly decent chap by comparison - that all the pieces begin to fall into place. It's giving away no secret to reveal that one plot element revolves around an impersonation - the kind of plot gimmick put to good use in such plays (and movies) as "Witness for the Prosecution" and "Sleuth." With Chester Morris playing the role on stage it's difficult to imagine the audience being taken, just as Robinson's unique mannerisms make the deception so obvious here that the film doesn't try to maintain the deception for too long. (There are signs that they tried to make it work; once or twice, Robinson's voice appears to have been lowered by J. Carrol Naish.)

Incidentally, the 1957 British remake (under the original title "The Dark Tower") was much changed, substituting Richard Attenborough for the theatre, and with some injections from "Spellbound," Herbert Lom, as a hypnotist, had the equivalent of the role played by Louis Calhern, and Ben Lyon, David Farrar and Anne Crawford roughly paralleled the Robinson-Cortez-Astor roles. It was a rather good film if memory serves, and some 20 minutes longer than the original.

-- Program ends approx. 10:30 --, followed by brief discussion session.

A reminder... no screening next Friday due to Easter break. The following week, April 24th, I will be out of town so screening will start promptly at 7:30 without introduction. Notes will be available as usual. Summer schedule will be published with the notes for the May 1 program.