ARCHIVE NIGHT

DANGEROUS CORNER (REX Radio, 1934) Directed by Phil Rosen; Screenplay by Ann Morrison Chapin and Madeleine Ruthven from the play by J.B. Priestley; Camera, J.Roy Hunt; Music, Max Steiner; 66 mins.


Both of tonight's films are quite rare, both are based on notable stage plays, and both have very solid casts, and on the surface it might seem rather churlish to shunt these films into an "Archive Night" slot. Neither film is wholly successful however. They deserve their chance to be seen again, but the archival framework will presumambly prevent expectations from running too high!

J.B. Priestley was an extremely prolific author, playwright, radio commentator and philosopher, and is still quite active, if rather pompously so, on British tv. His writings have run the gamut from light comedy to drama and philosophic probings, and British films have adapted many of his works. He also did a certain amount of screen-writing in the early 30's. Hollywood however has shown but little interest in him: "The Old Dark House", from his novel "Benthed", was the first Priestley work to be tackled by Hollywood (in 1932); "Dangerous Corner" was the second - and last! It's based on his very first play, which was also his first foray into "time" fantasies. A big hit on the London stage, it made an immediate star of Flora Robson. It was also, very recently, a surprise hit in a stylish London stage revival, but an off-Broadway revival of some earlier this year failed to repeat the London success. There are two basic problems with the film: one is that director Phil Rosen, essentially a director of "B" actioners, and not very inspired ones at that, is just about the last person to assign to an essentially intellectual work; and secondly, the play suffers from over-drastic tightening up and a subservience to the Production Code. When I saw the film first, its rather tame climax made me suspect that possibly a whole act had been eliminated! Having seen the London play revival in the interim, I can see that that is not the case. Without revealing too much of the plot, the basic drama revolves around the peeling away of layers of respectability of one of the key characters until he is shown to be an individual of absolutely despicable quality. The movie is forced to downplay many of his vices which are spelled out in the play, and thus robs the climax of much of its force. What remains however, is literary and fascinating, good dialogue delivered by good actors -- but not, unfortunately, handled by a director of matching quality.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

THE FIRST LADY (Warner Brothers, 1937) Directed by Stanley Logan; Produced by Hal B. Wallis; Associate Producer, Harry Joe Brown; Screenplay by Rowland Leigh from the play by George S. Kaufman and Katharine Dayton; Camera, Sid Hickox; Music, Max Steiner; 80 mins.


While satires on political climates (e.g., "The Front Page", "The Dark Horse") often hold up extremely well, the head-on political satires tend to date very quickly - not only because they lose topicality and the cutting edge of the satire is blunted, but also because audiences (and for that matter writers and directors too) become more politically sophisticated (or at least, informed) with each succeeding generation. With the way that political information has been conveyed by the mass media in the post-Watergate years, nobody today is going to buy "The First Lady" either as being particularly daring or much related to reality - even though the original play was known to be inspired by, if not based on, specific individuals. Certainly its humor is much blunted today. On the other hand, the film has been unavailable for many years due to a period in which the rights to the play had not been renewed so it is entitled to this outing. And it's always a pleasure to see a vintage starring vehicle for the cool, elegant Kay Francis (in the role Jane Cowl did on stage) although in this case the better role and the better lines go to Verna Teasdale, and not surprisingly her performance is the better one too.

"The First Lady" was the first directorial assignment for Stanley Logan, a former actor and stage writer who had been a dialogue director for Warners since 1933, and had worked on several Francis vehicles. He made only a handful of subsequent films, including "Women Are Like That" (also with Francis), "Love Honor and Behave" and "The Falcon's Brother". His direction here is pure theatre, but under the circumstances there was no other route to follow.

Wm. K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:06.

Fall schedules available this evening.