By now you will all know the disappointing news regarding "The 13th Chair". Where possible, we tried to notify many of you by phone or personally ahead of time, but as it was such a last-minute thing, there was no time for a mailing, merely a couple of days in which to display notices at the school. I can't tell you how frustrating and infuriating it is to have anticipated this very thing six months ago, but to have been assured and reassured by MGM that they knew exactly what they were doing and that there was no chance of a letdown. And then to be totally unconcerned about it when it happened, merely saying that no print would ever be available! Knowing that this does exist, I don't buy this latter statement, and will do my best to reinstatement it for a future session. Although I would not normally have played the 1937 version, it probably has more interest for the audience who came for the earlier version, than a better but totally different substitute, so we're letting it stand. Incidentally, MGM guarantee (?) that there will be no problem on the other films booked this season, since there are no more involved and they know what they have. However, for this record, the films are "NO BODY QUITS", "HAUNTED HONEYMOON" and "BOLLY OF THE VAMPIRE". If opening a great distance to see any of these, I'd recommend checking with the New School first to make sure there are no problems. I don't anticipate them and if there were, there'd be at least 10 days' notice so the previous week's notice could notify of any change ... but let's keep our fingers crossed.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAIR (MGM, 1937) Directed by George B. Seitz; Screenplay by Marion Parsons from the play by Bayard Veiller; Camera, Charles Clarke; Musical Direction, Bert Block; 66 minutes.

With: Dame May Whitty (Madame LaGrange); Madge Evans (Nell O'Neill); Lewis Stone (Inspector Marney); Elissa Landi (HeLEN Trent); Thomas Beck (Dick Crosby); Henry Daniell (John Wales); Janet Beecher (Tady Crosby); Ralph Forbes (Lionel Trent); Holmes Herbert (Sir Roscoe Crosby); Heather Thatcher (Mary Eastwood); Mathew Boulton (Commissioner Grimsnaw); Charles Trowbridge (Dr. Mason); and Robert Cotee, Elsa Buchanan, Lal Chand Mehta, Neil Fitzgerald, Louis Vincenot.

Although a slickly produced thriller which got good reviews when it opened at Loew's State (mainly because it was considered a superior product for the "B" picture that it really was), this "13th Chair" (even allowing for the unintended antagonism that it is bound to receive tonight!) is quite certainly the weakest of the three versions to date. Actually, there is unlikely to be a fourth version since while the plot is quite strong and intriguing, it does not have quite the same excitement and the thrill it radiated yesterday.

The first version, made in 1919 and directed by that interesting and now almost unknown stylish Leonce Peret, is almost certainly lost. The second, a talkie that was also released in a silent version, must be considered the "definitive" version and, creepy or not, it holds up well, as well as being academically interesting as the first and pre-"Dracula" liaison between Tod Browning and Bela Lugosi. This third version, disappoints in a number of areas.

First and foremost, it has no atmosphere. George B. Seitz, who directed, was essentially an action director, and even though dealing with stage material, he keeps it on the move, never stopping to create mood or let the characters develop methodically. The Browning version, for all its creakiness, had a " "..but not with a KISS "HAUNTED HONEYMOON...I'm beginning to wonder..." If anyone would minimise all of the play's theatrical effects and bravura dialogue, Lugosi, as the Inspector, made more than the most of his dialogue in the original, and the use of his body added much to the effectiveness of his role too, while Browning already had the wit to zero in for frequent closeups of Bela's eyes. Lewis Stone is brisk and business-like, using dialogue for information only, never for effect. For example, one of the plot's twists is that there are two girls called Helen among the murder suspects. Lewis notes this information for the record, throwing it away in a couple of seconds. But when Daniell says, "All in the family, Helen..."

"TWO... HELENS...!" And this exploitation of dialogue was repeated all through the 1929 version. And far from least, Dame May Whitty, while a delight as always, is much too smooth and well-groomed to make maximum effect. The role was originally written for Margaret Wycherly, who played it for a decade on the stage before transferring it to the screen in 1929, seeming as much witch as medium. Many of the plot twists too, admittedly not so dramatic in 1929, are tailored to partially strip the suspense of their original use, so that there is no time to milk them for their full potential. (The revelation of the relationship between the medium and the heroine comes later, and differently, in the original). However, disappointing or not, it has its moments. Henry Daniell, with little to do, is superb. The production is glossy, and the camerawork, especially in the final scene, very striking. And the cast is a beauty, though it's a pity to see so many former MGM prestige names being hUshed into a "B" picture, merely because they weren't busy elsewhere. This was the last of Madge Evans' MGM films (with only two more films ahead of her before retirement) and also virtually the end of Elissa Landi's career, with
only FRC's "Corregidor" ahead. Quite incidentally, the film has become a minor footnote to history in that it was the film that ushered in Britain's new adults-only "X" (for horror) sensor certificate. It seems totally unjustified today, as it did then, and it is probable that the censors were really stretching a point in their announced determination to discourage a return to horror film production by Hollywood, which had virtually abandoned the genre in 1936. (And, by the way, Holmes Herbert played the same role in the '29 film).  — Ten Minute Intermission —

THE EMPEROR'S CANDLESTICKS (MGM, 1937) Directed by George Fitzmaurice
Produced by John W. Considine, Jr. Screenplay by Mankelon Haffke, Harold Goldman and (uncredited) Erich von Stroheim from the novel by Baronne Orcey; Camera: Harold Rosson; Montage effects by Slavko Vorkapich; Musical Score: Franz Waxman; 90 mins.

With: William Powell (Waleński); Louise Rainer (Countess Muranova); Frank Morgan (Baron Suroff); Maureen O'Sullivan (Maria); Robert Young (Prince Jehann); Henry Stephenson (Grand Duke); Douglas Dumbrille (Kerun);
Berndes Hayes (Mitzi); Donald Kirk (Antone); Charles Waldron (Dr. Malachor); Barnett Parker (Rudolph); Frank Reicher (Pavloff); Paul Forcasi (Santuzzi);
Bert Roach (partner); E.E. Olive (Auctioneer); Spencer Charters (Ussher); Ian Wolfe (Leo); Theodor van Elts (Adjutant); Mitchell Lewis (Detective); Egon Brecher (Chief of Police); Erville Alderson (Conductor); Clarence Wilson (Stationmaster); Reelle Lloyd (gazelle); Maude Turner Gordon (Concierge);
Liddy Beets (waver); Maximilian Schell (Kovnitzke); Julius Raab (Radow); George Davis (Waiter); and Carole Landis, Harry Woods, Barlowe Borland, Paul Panzer, Sidney Bracey, Torben Meyer, Harold Miller, Harvey Clark, King Baggott, Leonard Carey, John Flicoor, Roland Varno, Vernon Downing, Bruce Mitchell.

"The Emperor's Candlesticks" opens with the camera sweeping through a lush ballroom scene, totally unnecessary to the plot other than to provide a glamorous background for the film's five major stars. Once they are set up, enter the conspirators, black-cloaked and black-masked — of course — and, equally of course, headed by Douglas Dumbrille. One immediately knows that one is back in MGM's lustiest period, and, also knowing that it's only a 90-minute film directed by that tongue-in-cheek specialist George Fitzmaurice, one also has the happy foreknowledge that it's not going to be one of those ponderous prestige films, but a snappy one with entertainment as its only object.

Even if the espionage plot, which rushes around between most of the capitals of Europe, wasn't in itself an intriguing story, its treatment and its elegance would be enough of themselves. But the story is good. Usually the gimmick of such stories (especially with Hitchcock) remains a gimmick, merely the means to keep the action on the move. But in this case the gimmick — important papers hidden in a candlestick — takes over, its various ramifications exploited for all they are worth. In the normal sense of screen melodrama, there isn't very much action — but there is a great deal of movement. Moreover, while there are hints of serious moments, the plot never allows them to seriously impair the romantic flavor of the whole frolic. Even Louise Rainer, then obviously a major MGM property, is taken down a peg or two possibly without her knowledge. As she beams her mannered smile for the umpteenth time, foreshadowing the fates of so many late Maria Schell movies, William Powell, in his most graceful manner, asks her "Has anybody ever told you you have a relentless smile?"

And despite its size and expense — and unlike too many other MGM films of the period — "The Emperor's Candlesticks" knows when enough is enough. Covering a lot of ground at an appropriately measured pace it reaches a point where the jigg is up, the chips are down, and the climax is reached. If it were to maintain the same pacing of the rest of the film, the final tidying-up process could be good for another hour at least. But Slavko Vorkapich, the montage specialist who had already created such a stunning montage at the mid-way point that we all thought he'd collected his pay and gone home to supper, is brought back to wrap up all the climactic complications in a brief, dazzling montage of hands feet and objects that is realistic, satisfying and in no wise disappointing — except possibly to the fans of Baronne Orcey's Scarlet Pimpernel novels, who may have been expecting a big chase or a duel.

In 90 minutes the film shows us what we've lost in craftsmanship, style, glamour, ensemble acting and overall tasteful, civilised entertainment. Not a hint of nudity or a four-letter word in all eight delightful reels!

William K. Everson
Program ends approx. 10.25, followed by Question and Discussion session.