An evening with Warner Brothers, 1932/33

YOU SAID A MOUTHFUL (Warner Brothers, 1932) Directed by Lloyd Bacon; Screenplay by Robert Lord and Bolton Mallory from an original story by William E. Dozer; Camera: Richard Towers; 75 mins.

In one way, tonight's showing of this film may be some kind of an object lesson. For years we have been getting constant (though admittedly not overwhelming) requests to play a Joe E. Brown film. And in some respects something of an enigma. He was enormously popular in the thirties; in exhibitor circles he was one of the top money-making stars, he frequently placed high in the list, while W.C. Fields and the Marx Brothers did not even make it to the runners-up. But somehow, like Wheeler and Woolsey, he is an acquired taste very much looked in to that period, and it is hard to fathom his widespread appeal. Equally hard is to find an appropriate or representative picture. Some of his funniest gags appear like cases in rather dull pictures; some of his best pictures appear like those by virtue of story or a director like Mervyn LeRoy and one relatively little to do with Joe E. Brown. So rather than try to weigh one set of values against the other, we opted for a generally representative film — with the added asset (and insurance?) of Ginger Rogers. If it doesn't work, at least it's a harmless experiment. And if it does, there's a huge backlog of Brown films awaiting us! It's an amusing rather than a funny film, unlike Lloyd's silent "Grandma's Boy" — but with rather likeable. Some of its "novelty" elements, such as the "Strange Interlude"-derived inner monologues have of course lost that novelty value today, yet the original is pretty much forgotten. However, the Catalina locations are pleasant and prompt the Warner orchestra to saw away at "Avalon" as often as possible. As with so many early 30's comedies, many effects are achieved via back projection, and the comedy sequences do tend to date somewhat, when compared with the unstrained and original films. But there's a great deal of back projection that would go into such sequences today. But it's a pleasant little film, and even if it doesn't lead to a whole Brown series (as our first exposures of Jena Dieng and George Arliss films did) at least it'll remind us of a comedian who was once considered one of the greatest — certainly in terms of boxoffice power.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

THE WORLD CHANGES (First National, 1933) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy; Screenplay by Edward Chodorov from a novel by Sheridan Gibney; Camera: Tony Gaudio; 90 mins.

Before they discovered Zola, Pasteur, Dr. Erlich and Juarez, Warner's biopics usually centered around industrialists and financiers, actual and sometimes thinly fictionalized, and "The World Changes" is one of these. Actually it is a little more suited to Edward G. Robinson than to Paul Muni, but Robinson was already doing his most impressive and fair quota. Sheridan Gibney, a popular novelist whose stories provided fodder for several early Warnema films, has developed the Warnerina Perber territory with a story covering some seven generations. It was the last and most ambitious of Mervyn LeRoy's five exceedingly varied 1933 productions, and in the early stage at least there is time for some of his careful imagery. The scene of the settlers' wagon arriving, the driver being told "You're here" and then heading for the cabin with chimney smoke rising lazily into the air, is a beautiful welding of sound and image. But shortly thereafter the traditional Warner pace takes over, and what film loses in subtlety it gains in excitement. Volcano-like, the script shoots out new generations and new complications every reel or so — madness, madness, financial ruin and recovery — and all with a new set of players, so that the film becomes a veritable "who's who at Warner Brothers". For some reason, Allen Jenkins and Frank McHugh don't make it! Apart from the sheer pleasure of watching people like Frank McHugh and Mary Astor, there are such added — even ecstatic — delights as seeing the young Paul Muni and charming Harold Shipman grow up to be the equally perennial weakening and sniveler Gordon Westcott and Margaret Lindsay. At least one character that one assumes has to be dead by mid-picture turns up again at the end, reputedly "nearby 30", although 120 would be nearer the mark. But in the showmanship tradition there is time for detail. World War One is skipped entirely, and in typical Warner scripting fashion is facing financial ruin at one point and cannot raise the millions he needs by the next morning, but is saved by an idea (which would presumably take months to implement) presented on screen in a five-second montage! Muni seems a little frivolous in the early Western portions of the film, sitting his horse well enough (with herds of stock that cattle meaning asked him) with an air that says he's slumming, but that better things are ahead! All in all, no rediscovered masterpiece — exhilarating and enjoyable. —— William K. Everson.

PROGRAM ENDS: 10:30.