An Evening of Bizarre Melodramas (and Quirky Comedy)

THE WEBSTER BOY (Regal Films, Britain, 1962) Directed by Don Chaffey; Screenplay by Ted Allan from an original story by Leo Marks; Camera, Gerald Gibbs; Theme Music by Harold Geller, Incidental Music by Wilfred Josephs; Produced by Emmet Dalton; 85 mins.

With: John Cassavetes (Vance Miller); Elizabeth Sellars (Margaret Webster); David Willson; Maitland Mackinnon (Headmaster); Geoffrey Bayldon (Charles Jamison); Richard O'Sullivan (Jimmy Webster); Karl Lanchbury (Michael Johnson); John Bull (Alfred Baxter); Norman Rodway (Donald Saunders); Seymour Cassel (Vic)

Written by Leo Marks, the great wartime code-breaker who a couple of years earlier had also written "Peeping Tom", an equally quirky foray into troubled father-son relationships, "The Webster Boy" is virtually an unknown film. It had no theatrical release in the U.S., and although part of an American tv package, the distributor had apparently only this one print, a greyish and not too clear print. Apparently since the print was here they decided to take an odd booking or two - as evidenced by the occasional cue marks on the print - but not to bother with additional prints or wide distribution. So one can assume that almost nobody here has seen it. That doesn't make it a great film of course, but it is unorthodox and interesting and with some extremely good performances. Moreover, although conditions have changed a great deal, at the time its depiction of the absolute power enjoyed (and mis-used) by certain masters in the British school system was not at all exaggerated, the fortunately the satirical schoolmaster here didn't really influence and by all one certainly does. There are also indications that this film was originally planned as an "A", with the Alan Mowbray part planned and written for W.C. Fields. When that didn't come off, it was scaled down to a programmer with "smaller" names but Mowbray playing the Fields role in a direct imitation of the great man. Also the scaling down in budget meant a relatively tame climax, but after such a lively and eventful 70 minutes, that hardly matters. Eduardo Cianelli, one of Hollywood's best villains, does his usual sadistic work, and has a classic two-paragraph reply to a Robert McWade question. Typical Hollywoodians also provides a couple of unintended laughs. After a magnificent montage of flood scenes (mainly newreels of New England disasters, though the locale is in the South) the word FLOOD is superimposed on the screen for those of us who do not know what we are going on. And when the hero valiantly risks his life in the climax, swimming through the flood, he is spurred on - or possibly discouraged - by a Negro choir singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"! As we have indicated before, this is the kind of expert little 50's movie that is becoming an endangered species since they are preserved on tape for tv usage, and in no other way.

THAT'S MY WIFE (Hal Roach-MGM, 1929) Directed by Lloyd French; Story and supervision by Leo McCarey; Camera, George Stevens; 16 mins.

With LAUREL & HARDY, Vivien Oakland (Mrs Hardy); Charlie Hall, Sam Lufkin, Harry Bernard (Waiters); Jimmy Aubrey (drunk); William Courtright (Uncle)

One of the least-known Laurel & Hardy late silents (shown here with its original and sometimes not-so-subtle music and effects track), "That's My Wife" features some decidedly quirky humor and one of Laurel's best dame portrayals. So it seems a fitting climax for an offbeat evening. The gags are developed in parallel rather than consecutive sequence, and all are milked to the full.

-- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.40 Short discussion period follows; time will permit a longer session at our silent program next week.