BEAUTY FOR SALE (MM, 1933) Directed by Richard Boleslavsky; Camera, James Wong Howe; Screenplay by Zelda Sears and Eve Greene from a novel by Faith Baldwin, "Beauty"; 87 mins; New York premiere, Capitol Theatre.

With Wade Evans (Letty Lyson); Alice Brady (Mrs Sherwood); Otto Kruger (Mark Sherwood); Una Merkel (Carol Merrick); Mary Robson (Mrs Merrick); Phillips Holmes (Surt Barton); Eddie Nugent (Bill Merrick); Hedda Hopper (Nadine Sonya); Florine McKinney (Jane); Margaret Crewe (Mrs Green); Isabel Jewell (Hortense); Charlie Grapewin (Carol's "Friend"); Melville Cooper (Salesgiant); Maidel Turner (Customer).

We used the term "melodrama" above in the contemporary sense; back in the thirties, melodrama usually included an alliance with crime, and the only crimes in tonight's films are moral ones. Basically they are soap operas, but high-grade ones and almost aggressively pre-Code. Both also are linked by the fact that each comes from the pen of a top woman writer of the thirties. No less than ten of Faith Baldwin's novels were adapted to the screen in that decade, including "Weekend Marriage", "Skyscraper Souls" and the relatively post- Code "Miss Versus Secretary", the bleached-white morals of which stand in stark contrast to "Beauty for Sale". I haven't read the novel, but apparently it was much changed for the screen, and the script remains puzzling in its assumption that delicate beauty parlors were little more than fronts for prostitution. That element aside, "Beauty for Sale" overcomes basic familiarity of material by freshness of approach and a pleasing naturalness to many of the conversational scenes. Wade Evans is both graceful and very lovely as the heroine, and it's good to see her in the major lead of an MM film for once. Her relaxed quality is all the more surprising in that she made no less than 16 films in 1933; she walked up something of a record with the screen that same year, which may explain the occasional frentic quality of her acting! At MM Otto Kruger was usually fated to relinquish Joan Crawford to Clark Gable, and it's good to see him having better luck here. Alice Brady delivers her usual (and required) performance, one of dozens that concealed what a sensitive actress she could be when given the chance. And Eddie Nugent delivers the good as what must be the most coddlish 'hero' of any movie (from MM down to Ajax); if nothing else, the obnoxious quality of his performance engenders tremendous suspense throughout. Will the script clean him up enough so that he can be a serious matrimonial candidate for Miss Evans or not? Apart from the sheer pleasure of watching Wade Evans, the film offers a bonus in the collaboration between director Boleslavsky and cameraman Howe. The compositions and lighting of unusually good closeups lends a lot of power to otherwise routine scenes; one close shot on the three girls constantly shifts focus from one to the other as they take over their portion of the scene, and they milk a slowly closing door for beautifully underplayed suspense.

10 Minute Interval

STANGERS MAY KISS (MM, 1931) Directed by George Fitzmaurice; Camera, William Daniels; Screenplay by John Meehan from the novel by Ursula Parrott; 85 mins; NY premiere, Capitol Theatre.

With Norma Shearer (Lisaeth); Robert Montgomery (Steve); Neil Hamilton (Alan); Marjorie Rambeau (Geneva); Irene Rich (Celia); Hale Hamilton (Andrew); Conchita Montenegro (Spanish Girl); Jed Prouty (Harry); Albert Conti (Count de Bazan); Henry Armetta (waiter); George Davis (waiter); and Kane Richmond, Ray Milland (guests at party); Ward Bond (football guest at party); Neil Craig.

Despite Louis B. Mayer's puritanical views, there was as much immorality - and amorality - going on in MM movies in 1931 as anywhere else, and "Strangers May Kiss" - despite being (unfortunately) a little less glossy than its two-years-later co-feature - is quite startling once it gets going. Ursula Parrott was a slightly more old-fashioned (and sometimes more florid) writer than Faith Baldwin, and the seven of her novels that made it to the screen in the 30's also included an earlier and similar Shearer vehicle "The Divorcee", "There's Always Tomorrow" and the intriguingly titled "Leftover Ladies". The casual disregard for moral compensation and the equally casual acceptance of a double standard make these pre-Code films fascinating in their comparison with triangle films of the post-Code era, in which everything is moral, neatly fabricated, formularistic and entirely unreal. Shearer, as fascinating to watch (though in a different way) as Wade Evans, brings all her tricks and mannerisms into play as she goes to hall with a vengeance, duplicating Garbo's path in "Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise". Her gowns and hair styles become more abandoned as she slips steadily downhill, though she never gets as low as the South American dive that was Garbo's final port of call. The occasional similarity between both films is interesting - the boy friend casually mentioning his wife at just the wrong moment - but these are differences too, not least in the writing styles. "Beauty for Sale" was written by women scenarists from a book by a woman. My wife insists that some of Shearer's dialogue here could only have been written by a man, a supposition bolstered by the sole male scenarist credit on this one. Regardless, neither film has nudity or four-letter words, and manage to stir up more excitement and raised eyebrows than almost anything from the 30's -- probably because films of the 30's explicit and underline such material, while in the 30's they merely used it and took it for granted that audiences didn't need to be nudged into the realisation that they were seeing "adult" material.

Program ends approx. 10:45.

William K. Everson

Short discussion session follows.