TWO EARLY 30's MELODRAMAS

TWO SECONDS (Warner-FIrst National, 1932) Directed by Marvyn LeRoy; scenario by Harvey Thew from a play by Elliott Lester; Camera, Sol Polito; 68 mins. NY premiere: Winter Garden; last school showing, April 1970.

With Edward G. Robinson (John Allen); Preston Foster (Dud Clark); Vivienne Osborne (Shirley Day); J. Carroll Naish (Tony); Guy Kibbee (Booke); Adrienne Dore (Amidie); Walker Waller (Judge); Dorothea Walbert (Lizzie); Edward McWade (Doctor); Berton Churchill (Warden);
William Demarest (College boy); Lew Ayres; Franklin Parker, Frederick Howard (reporters);
Helen Philips (Landlady); Otto Hoffman (Justice of the Peace); Harry Woods (executioner);
Luana Walters (street pickup) and McWough.

A raw little sex melodrama, "Two Seconds" is based on a play by Elliott Lester (father of Richard) in which Preston Foster essayed the same role, and which is certainly - both stylistically and thematically - a film noir long before that term was coined, and is quite coincidentally a kind of foreshadowing of Robinson's later "Scarlet Street". It runs for only a little over an hour, yet even so a goodly portion of the development is told in prolonged two-person conversations. The linking scenes laid in street, dance hall, courtroom, prison etc., provide enough variety and change of pace to prevent the film from seeming as talkative as it actually is, but don't altogether hide the theatrical origins. The one weakness of the film is, and it is hardly a fair criticism, that it is essentially a film that works best on the first time around. The gothic matter-of-factness of the variously, the zippy 30's dialogue and wisecracks (not too many of them, but they provide welcome relief), the nostalgic musical themes and the overall surface power completely should hold one. The second time around one realizes how basically "Two Seconds" is its plot structure and how essentially pointless Robinson's final scene. And Robinson himself becomes almost a parody of his secondaries in his semi-mad scene, where he gestures, puffs at cigarettes, stares bug-eyed at the camera, whirls around like a dervish and generally behaves for all the world like a Robinson imitator. The impression one gets is of a talented and promising newcomer, not yet really a good actor, having the time of his life with a tour-de-force scene, and the stagey effect is underscored by the deliberately unreal stage lighting in the trial scene. It is hard to realize that these overdone histronics follow by a year Robinson's dynamic earlier collaboration with LeRoy in "Five Star Final". Presumably, both artists, urged by Warners from important films to programmers and back again on an assembly-line basis, just didn't care enough about "Two Seconds" to give it the time and care it deserved. But again, this attitude doesn't really come through on the first viewing, which, Robinson's mad scene apart, carries quite a punch.

--- 10 Minute Intermission ---

UPPER WORLD (Warner Bros., 1934) Directed by Roy Del Ruth; screenplay by Ben Markson from an original story by Ben Hecht; Camera, Tony Gaudio. NY premiere; Strand Theatre; last New School showing, Dec. 1970.

With Warren William (Alexander Stream); Mary Astor (Mrs Stream); Ginger Rogers (Iddy); Andy Devine (chauffeur); Dickie Moore (Tommy); Henry O'Neill (banker); J. Carroll Naish (Lou); Sidney Tolmer (Noran); Theodore Newton (Rocklen); Robert Barrat (Clark); Ferdinand Gottschalk (Marcus); Dennis O'Keefe, Bill Elliott (reporters) and Howard Hickman, Frank Conroy, Edwin Stanley, William B. Davidson, Guy Usher, Wilfrid Lucas, John Qualls, Robert Greig (butler); Wlliam Robertson (police chief); Hilton Kibbee, Phil O'McClough.

Released in mid-1934, when the Production Code was getting itself solidly entrenched, "Upper World" shows some signs of compromise and of toning down the rawness that such a theme would have had (at Warners) the previous year -- but not too many. Ginger Rogers, for example, is clearly the mistress of J. Carroll Naish (virtually repeating the same role from "Two Seconds"), an unlikely proposition to begin with since, even at the height of the depression, a young lady of Miss R's talents and disposition could have done rather better than that! Still, a couple of lines are slipped in to minimize their relationship and to suggest that it is not quite as coy as it appears. It may be Code influence that results in Rogers faring so badly in this film. A likeable character, well-played and very much of a victim, she is killed off (only the 2nd time she ever died on screen) without her reputation being cleared, and with nobody seeming to care very much. It's an unsettling element in an otherwise very intelligent little film, sensibly written and well played, though the climax is a bit abrupt and could have done with an extension. Incidentally, it's rather curious to find Mary Astor's role enabling her to play, in a sense, both Mrs Dodsworth a couple of years before she played just the second Mrs Dodsworth in that still outstanding William Wyler film, "Dodsworth" and her very best work under the old Warner Brothers studio system, and his later non-Warner work, "Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back" being a major exception, never seemed as good.

Program ends approx. 10:05 --- William K. Everson ---

Discussion sessions resume with last screening.

Historical corrective note: the program notes for program #1 commented (re "Internes Can't Take Money") that Stenwyck and McOrea had made a quartet of films together. Actually there were six.