In the days when Hollywood was mass-producing entertainment on a huge scale, obviously not all films were of major or even minor artistic value. And of the ones that were not, many did not take on added academic value in later years by virtue of young talent on the way up or themes that in some way reflected their period. Particularly in terms of comedy, many were just inconsequential if expert pieces of froth. If they seemed far more entertaining today than they did then, it's partly because of their roster of now largely vanished players, and partly because the studio system of the 30's and 40's gave them a technical gloss and finish that we then took for granted but don't any more. When one of these films comes along, they sometimes present a programming problem. They don't seem important enough to include in a program oriented towards film history, and yet they're too entertaining in their own right not to include them. Tonight's solution is, hopefully, the best one -- wait until two of them show up, and show them together regardless of theme or studio or period, letting them be linked by a single factor -- their desire to entertain, and no more.

HER MASTER'S VOICE (Paramount 1935, rei: 1936) Directed by Joseph Santley; Produced by Walter Wanger; Screenplay by Joe Schary and Barry Gubser from a play by Clare Kummer; Camera, James Van Trees; Songs by Jimmy McHugh and Gus Kahn. 75 mins.

With: Edward Everett Horton (Fred Farrar); Peggy Conklin (Queen Farrar); Laura Hope Crews (Aunt Min); Elisabeth Patterson (Mrs Martin); Grant Mitchell (Twilling); Ruth Warren (Phoebe); Charles Coleman (Craddock); Dick Elliott (Police Captain).

Oddly enough, although based on a successful Broadway play and thus presumably having an appeal to a wider audience than usual in New York -- especially since it cast Crews and Patterson in their original stage roles -- "Her Master's Voice" received no NY first run at all. A fairly elaborate Warners promotion operation, it was certainly not "B", but possibly it gave that impression with Edward Everett Horton in the lead. As such it was rather lost in the shuffle with all the other expert but less ambitious Horton and Charlie Ruggles comedies that Paramount were making in the mid-30's. (How we wish we could find a print of Ruggles' 1936 "Mind Your Own Business", I haven't seen it since 1936, but I have it in memory as being an absolute delight. The search goes on). "Her Master's Voice" is obviously a bit stagebound and talkative, and might not hold up to too many repeat viewings, but it's funny, charming and quite unpredictable, and should play well to an audience not familiar with it. That always interesting actress Peggy Conklin is not flatteringly photographed however. The film was one of the more ambitious that former actor Joseph Santley (once billed as "America's Greatest Boy Actor") when he appeared in a troupe with DeWolf Hopper and Lew Fields directed, climaxing several years of writing and directing in the "MM/Monogram/Mascot vineyards. He did eventually graduate to bigger pictures at Universal and Republic, but they were mainly smaller "A's like "Remember Pearl Harbour", "Spirit of Culver" and "Brazil".

-- 10 minute intermission --

MY LOVE CAME BACK (Warner Brothers, 1940) Directed by Kurt Bernhardt; Produced by Hal B. Wallis; Associate Producer Wolfgang Reinhart; Screenplay by Ivan Moff, Robert Buchner and Earl Baldwin from an original story by Walter Reisch; Camera, Charles Rosher; Music, Heinz Roemheld; 81 minutes. -- NY premiere, Strand Theatre, July 1940.

With: Olivia de Havilland (Amelia Cornell); Jeffrey Lynn (Tony Baldwin); Charles Winninger (Julius Mellette); Jane Wyman (Joy O'Keefe); Eddie Albert (Dusty Rhodes); Spring Byington (Mrs Mellette); William Orr (Paul Mellette); Ann Gillis (Valerie Mellette); S.Z. Sakall (Geza Peyer); Grant Mitchell (Dr. Ebbage); Charles Trowbridge (Dr. Downey); Mabel Taliaferro (Dowager); Sidney Bracey (Atuler); Nanette Valon (Sophie).

While it's a charming trifile and received appropriately enthusiastic reviews, it's not too surprising that "My Love Came Back" is little remembered. It's a minor entry in a major year, and while it is the kind of comedy that Warners were making very frequently in that period, "Million Dollar Baby" being another of theirs related by period, theme, director, crew and at least one star. Moreover, its title has virtually nothing to do with its plot, and thus it's easy to confuse the film with such similarly-titled works as "Lover Come Back", "I Met My Love Again" and "I Love For Love". After a lengthy career in Germany and Britain in the late 20's and 30's, this was Kurt Bernhardt's first Hollywood film for Warners. He has a lot of help from European colleagues, as the credits indicate, and the film has the look -- backed up by the Walter Reisch credit for the original story -- of being a remake of a European film. This of course was a common practice at the time ("Three Smart Girls", "Bachelor Mother", "Spring Parade") and one can well imagine this story, with its sexual piquancies unburdened by the Production Code, being a charming and sophisticated European comedy. If it is less European in tone than the three films mentioned, it certainly retains an elegance and sophistication and particularly a use of "ordinary" people flung into comedic situations by misunderstandings, that has a decidedly Continental flavor. Even if nothing much happens, it's a pleasure to see so many likeable people (including a very pert Jane Wyman before she took herself seriously as an actress) hard at work convinces us that something is about to happen, and that it is well worth waiting for -- as indeed it is.

Program ends; 10:30 approx. Discussion session follows. Spring schedule will be included with next week's notes.