TWO MODEST BUT ENJOYABLE 30's MUSICALS

ST. LOUIS BLUES (Paramount, 1932; rcl 1939) Directed by Raoul Walsh; produced by Jeff Lazarus; Screenplay by John C. Moffitt, Malcolm Stuart Boylan, Frederick Hazlitt Brennan and Virginia Van Upp from a story by Eleonore Griffin and William Rankin; Camera, Theodor Sparkuhl and Ted Tetzlaff; Songs and music by Frank Loesser, Hoagy Carmichael and the team from Kopf, Gershwin, Leo Robin, Tito Guizar, Matty Malneck. Current prints bear the title "Best of the Blues", which was also the film's original working title; NY Premiere, Paramount Theatre, February 1939. 90 mins.

With: Dorothy Lamour (Norma Malone/Alona); Lloyd Nolan (Dave Guernery); Tito Guizar (San Ramos); Jerome Cowan (Ivar DeBret); Jessie Ralph (Aunt Trible); William Frawley (Mayor Martingale); Mary Parker (Punkins); Maxine Sullivan (Ida); Clift Narroz (Shorty); Victor Kilian (Sheriff); Walter Scheckler (Mr. Levy); Jack Norton (Newspaper Man); Ray Walker at the end; The Tea Lady; The Waitress; The Manager, (Virgil) Spencer Charters (Judges); Joseph Crehan (Simpson); Archie Twitchell (Camerman); Billy Arnold (hotel clerk); Florence Dudley (Secretary);Gene Morgan (publicity man); Ernest Parnell ( Policeman White); Ernie Adams, Edgie Borden, Edward Hearn, Carl Harbaugh (actors); Sterling Holloway (bootsman); Nora Cecil (storekeeper); Wade Boteler (Police Lieut.); Tom Hanlon (radio announcer); and Lane Chandler, Ethel Gregory, Owen Kenyon, Joyce Matthews, Ruth Rogers, Lonnie Walters, Jean Fennick, Sheila D'Arcy, James Burtis, Clarence Harvey, Kathryn Sheldon.

St. Louis Blues is the kind of film that, in our earlier days, we would never have dreamed of playing. It's an entertaining, somewhat contrived musical; time certainly hasn't either worsened or improved it, but it has made us more aware of the talent that went into even routine movies back in the thirties. Quite apart from its delightful cast and a perhaps over-formidable array of writers and tunemsists, it has two top cameramen, Hans Dreier and Ernst Fegte, top-liners both, on the art direction, LeRoy Prinz staging the dances and Gene Lumon and Ray Walker at the end of a screen where we've never seen them before (and nothing inhibited Walsh more than the inability to indulge in healthy vulgarity and cheerful sadism), bringing its Paramount contract to an end with a film that at least showed he was awake and trying. The next year he'd be back to top form with "The Roaring Twenties" at Warners, and his career would zoom into high gear again. One of many films still cashing in on the popularity of "Show Boat", "St. Louis Blues" also kids the Dorothy Lamour sarong image, and is generally amiable and likeable, with an above-average quota of good songs. Recent Mississippi floods are somewhat tastelessly exploited as plot fodder, but that, and other moments of physical sensation, keep the sensibilities unlikely to make the move. Quite incidentally, this is one of the many films that George Raft turned down.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

TRANSATLANTIC MERRY-GOR-ROUND (Reliance-United Artists, 1934) Directed by Benjamin Stoloff; Produced by Edward Small; Original story and screenplay by Leon Gordon, with additional dialogue and scenes by Joseph Noncure March and Harry W. Conn; Camera, Ted Tetzlaff; Musical Director, Alfred Newman; Musical numbers directed by Sammy Lee and Larry Caballos; Music by Matty Malneck, Johnny Mercer, Richard Whiting and Sidney Clare; 90 mins.

NY Premiere, Rviol Theatre, November 1934.

With: Gene Raymond (Jimmy Brett); Nancy Carroll (Sally Marsh); Jack Benny (Chad Denby); Sydney Howard (Dan Campbell); Mtzi Green (Mtzi); Sid Silvers (Shorty); Sidney Blackmer (Lee Loether); Ralph Morgan (Herbert Rosson); Shirley Grey (Anya Rosson); Patsy Kelly (Patsy Clarke); Sam Hardy (Jack Summers); William Boyd (Joe Saunders); Robert Elliott (Insp. McBenney); Frank Parker (Frank); Carlyle Moore (Ned Marsh); Jean Sargent (Jean); Jimmy Grier and his Orchestra; The Bowell Sisters; and Jack Weller, Larry Stevens, Don Douglas, Willis Clark.

The opening remarks on St. Louis Blues apply pretty much to this film too, although comparatively speaking this is a more ambitious film and a better one. But no matter how ambitious he got, there was always an "economy" look to Edward Small's productions. None of the players here are really at their peak (though Benny had recently been voted the favorite radio comic) and none of them get star billing. However, there was always a certain amount of "jive" in Small's Films, and here we have that every dollar spent showed up on the screen. With its slick art deco sets, Transatlantic Merry-Go-Round manages to look more expensive than it was, the cast is full of old favorites, and on the whole it's a most enjoyable mixture of comedy, music (the big number being patently copied from Ruby Berkeley) and melodrama - though in the latter regard there isn't much doubt as to the identity of the mystery killer! The only complaint one might make is of the wearing of Sydney Howard, a very funny comedian from Britain who was a curious combination of Lloyd Hamilton and W.C.Fields, in his only Hollywood film - although his downplayed drunk here is very amusing. Meanwhile, back in the 40's, the film was quite entertaining and full prints (like this one) are quite rare. George Arliss devotees may be glad to note that Mitzl Green's clever if obnoxious imitation of him was one of the initial cuts, though it's here in all its glory (?) in this print, as is Benny's parody of John Barrymore in "Grand Hotel", a skit he first performed in his "Canada Dry" radio show in 1932. (Frank Parker, making his film debut, was a performer on many of Benny's radio shows, and writer Harry W. Conn was also a Benny radio scripter). Incidentally the film was originally planned to carry the title "Transatlantic Showboat", and Small agreed to title change (or was paid for it) since Universal's remake was already in the planning stage. Wiliam E. Everson

PROGRAM FINISHES 10:50. No discussion tonight.

PLEASE NOTE: I will be away next week, so the program will start promptly at 7:30 without an introduction. Another reminder that the snow-cancelled film noir program is to be repeated on Tuesday May 17.