The Witching Hour (Paramount, 1954) Directed by Henry Hathaway; Screenplay by Salisbury Field and Anthony Veiller from the play by Augustus Thomas; Camera, Ben Reynolds; 70 mins. With: Sir Guy Standing (Judge Martin Prentice); John Halliday (John Brockfield); Judith Allen (Nancy Brockfield); Tom Business (Clay Thorne); Olive Nell (Mrs Thorne); William Frawley (Orson F. Hardy); Richard Carle (Lew Ellinger); Ralf Harada (Frank Hardhurst); Purnell Pratt (District Attorney); Gertrude Michael (Margaret Price); Frank Sheridan (Chief of Police); Ferdinand Gottschalk (Dr. Meikeljohn); and John Larkin, Selmer Jackson, Howard Lang, George Webb, Robert Littlefield.

Both of tonight's films are interesting examples of major directors in the earliest years of their directorial careers. Henry Hathaway had been an assistant director in the silent period, being promoted to full directorial status in 1933 on the Zane Grey western series. Less than a year and a half later, he had eight good westerns under his belt, an actioner, "Come on, You Rascals, and Go Fishing," and the same year he directed "The Witching Hour" for General Foods production. By the end of that second year, "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer" would establish him as a major director of "A" action material. Interestingly, though, with its slight supernatural angle and overall romanticism, "The Witching Hour" can also be considered something of a dry run for one of his best (and least typical) films, "Peter Ibbetson.

"The Witching Hour," a play written in 1907, had been filmed by Paramount in 1921. Like last week's "The 13th Chair," it was the kind of property that was dusting off and readapted not because there was a great demand for it, but rather because the studio owned the property anyway and it was a useful vehicle for keeping contract players busy, and training new talent. However, if it was made for expediency, it doesn't show: it's a glossy, handsome, carefully made film, and the only sign of economy measures might be in the scripting, where a whole melodramatic sub-plot is dropped and the complex plot simplified somewhat. Perhaps Paramount could have reduced the budget further, but wisely Paramount didn't do this. Legally and medically the film is often on very shaky ground, but at least in the context of a turn-of-the-century play its plot devices are more acceptable, as is the romantic utilization of a ghostly visitation. If one doesn't know the play, the film does have surprises; in fact it takes a long time for the film to settle into its main theme and decide where it's going. With veterans Standing and Halliday dominating, and newcomer Judith Allen and Paul Henreid, it still holds up dramatically, even if one is inclined to question some of its medical statements about hypnotism (Note: when the film opened at the Paramount, Ethel Nerman and George Jessel headed the stage show).

Ten Minute Intermission

Four Hours to Kill (Paramount, 1932) Directed by Mitchell Leisen; Produced by Arthur Hornblow Jr.; Screenplay by Norman Krasna from his play "Small Miracle"; Camera, Theodor Sparkuhl; 73 mins. (Note: Ralph Rainger and Leo Robin get screen credit for music and lyrics, but such music is limited to what is heard off-stage, since, deliberately, no musical interlude is shown.) With: Richard Barthelmess (Tony Mako); Joe Morrison (Buddy); Helen Maak (Helen); Gertrude Michael (Sylvia Temple); Dorothy Tree (Mae Danish); Charles Wilson (Taff); Ray Milland (Carlo); Roscoe Karns (Johnson); Henry Travers (Mac Mason); Paul Harvey (Capt. Seavers); Noel Madison (Andersen); Lee Kohlmar (Pa Herman); Bela Lugosi (Lucky); Robert Kent, under the name Douglas Blackley (George Nelson); Craig Reynolds, under the name Hugh Emfield (Chaufeur); Paul Gerrits (Repairman); John Howard, under the name John Cox Jr. (Assistant Repairman); Mitchell Leisen (Orchestra leader).

After many years as an art director, then an apprentice period as a co-director (mainly with Stuart Walker), Leisen was launched as a full director on a fairly impressive level, starting with "Grable Song" (1933) and following up with "Death Takes a Holiday." "Four Hours to Kill" was his fifth film and (in my view) his best to that time; unlike Hathaway, he settled down on a kind of unimportant "A" picture output, alternating really good films (mainly comedies) with routine assignments until he hit his stride in 1939 with "Midnight" and "Remember the Night", and established himself as a front-rank Paramount director. For Barthelmess, sadly, it was almost the end of the trail, and was his last starring role in Hollywood. His first film after his long-running Warner contract ended the year before, it should have re-established him. He gives an excellent performance, tough and brooding, but his box-office value had gone; between this film in 1935 and his retirement from the screen in 1942, there were only five more films, though he did get excellent notices for his performance in "Only Angels Have Wings".

As befits a film made by a former art-director, "Four Hours to Kill" is handsomely designed (like most of Leisen's films), exploiting the limitations of a stage property rather than grandly accepting them. It's given to redundant scenes and the impossible task of subduing the playwright. The warm and sensitive Gertrude Michael, usually wasted, has a chance to really show what she can do; likewise Charles Wilson, usually one of the most type-cast of Hollywood players, has probably his finest screen role (and stock role) here. Even Roscoe Karnes, in one big scene, adds genuine pathos to a stock role. The Production Code supervision is well in evidence but not seriously so. Incidentally, Jack LaRue did this play well - in London in the late 40's.

Program Ends: 10:15, discussion following. - WEE