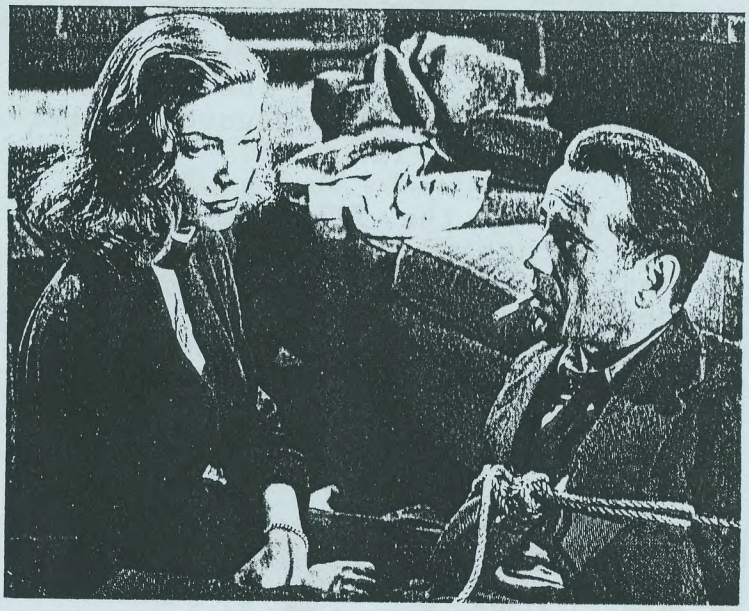
The Big Sleep

WNCC
WOKING'S NEW CINEMA CLUB

[USA; 1946] 114 mins; B&W
Certificate PG

Directed by.....Howard Hawks
Screenplay by.....William Faulkner
Leigh Brackett
Jules Furthman
Original Novel by...Raymond Chandler
Photography by.....Sid Hickox
Music by.....Max Steiner



Cast:-

Philip Marlowe.....Humphrey Bogart
Vivian Rutledge.....Lauren Bacall
Carmen Sternwood....Martha Vickers
Genearal Sternwood..Charles Waldron
Joe Brady.....Louis Jean Heydt
Eddie Mars.....John Ridgley
Agnes.....Sonia Darrin
Harry Jones.....Elisha Cook Jnr
Canino.....Bob Steele
Bookstore Girl.....Dorothy Malone

"But, surely it's on TV at least twice a year ?", I hear you cry. Ah, yes, but I remember how as a teenager I went to a run-down flea pit in Coventry one Saturday afternoon, (well, you wouldn't go there to watch football, would you !), and saw a double bill of The Big Sleep and The Maltese Falcon. By then, (the mid-70's), I was already familiar with both films, but seeing them on the big screen made me realise why my father had once walked 6 miles home, having spent his bus fare on seeing Bogart's latest effort at 'The Palace' cinema. In short, sitting in your living room does not allow you to become fully immersed in Raymond Chandler's murky, smoky and downright sleazy vision of 1940's America.

'The Big Sleep' is the definitive Chandler adaptation; the only one that achieves the toughness, elegance and pace of his books. It is also one of the finest mainstream noir-thrillers ever made. As Bogart's Marlowe gets involved with the Sternwood family's many problems - drink, drugs, blackmail, pornography, murder and nymphomania - director Howard Hawks never allows the plot to get in the way of his main interest: the growing sexual attraction between Bogart and Bacall, (on screen and in real life) and the way that emotion causes them to continually change their attitudes to one another and the various criminal goings-on around them

It should have been called The Big Snog. In 1946, Howard Hawks took Raymond Chandler's original hard-boiled story — its dark characters, its dark plot — and turned it instead into a romantic screen fantasy. It may have made no sense, but it was a huge success: few cared who killed who, so long as Bogart ended up in the back of the car with Bacall. Along the way, Hawks had come up with an adventurous new storytelling technique. Movies as dissimilar, but remarkable, as Citizen Kane and Pulp Fiction would not have been as they are if The Big Sleep hadn't been there first.

David Thompson
'The Observer'

It is a triumph of style over content: there are seven murders and lots of incidental violence in a plot so tortuous that even the scriptwriters didn't know who committed one of them ! The confusion is not surprising when you consider that Chandler had cobbled together two short stories to make the original novel which was then adapted by three scriptwriters - William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman - who tended to work in isolation on different scenes and had the added difficulty of trying to excise or modify some of the racier bits of plot in order to make it censor-friendly. However, the competition between the writers, (a tactic used to good effect on modern TV soaps), produced a razor-sharp script that sizzles with wit, insolence and innuendo.

Amazingly, the film performed so poorly on its initial release in 1944, that it was held back until 1946 before eventually getting a nationwide distribution. By then, the war had ended and audiences were perhaps more willing to journey through Chandler's mythical Los Angeles landscape of darkened bungalows, decaying office buildings and sinister nightspots in the company of dependable Philip Marlowe: "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid".

The Big Stamp, starring Bogie

THE image of Humphrey Bogart (pictured) as a hard-boiled private investigator is to be celebrated on a U.S. postage stamp. Based on the star's portrayal of Philip Marlowe in the 1946 classic film The Big Sleep, it will be issued next year. Bogart is the third Hollywood legend to be honoured in this way, following Marilyn Monroe and James Dean.

It's not just Bogart and Bacall who make The Big Sleep so watchable; Martha Vickers as the spoilt little rich girl Carmen Sternwood, the source of all the trouble; Louis Jean Heydt as Joe Brody, a small-time crook, out of his depth; Elisha Cook Jnr as a tough, but doomed, hood; Dorothy Malone as Marlowe's bookselling accomplice; and Bob Steele as a chillingly ruthless gunman were all carefully chosen from the extensive Warner Bros. gallery of character actors.

Whatever you do, don't try to make sense of the plot or you'll be in danger of missing some of the cracking dialogue or the unspoken exchanges between Bacall and Bogart which gave the film so much of its enduring charm. Fifty years after its release, this is one film that you can watch over and over again and still find something new to admire. Like 'It Happened One Night', (screened earlier this season), it is a true "classic" piece of cinema history.

IAN SOWERBY.

POETS CORNER

THE OLD USHERETTE

I always thought those mooney faces
rather silly, 'specially in close up -

Clark Gable, Alan Ladd, they never
touched me. Much the nicest bit

was when the Mighty Organ rose
in orange light, between the A

and B films. Like a furnace
with that small black figure outlined

against the glare, stroking music.
March of the Gladiators, he told me

came first: when the lights turned
green he'd do Tales from the Vienna Woods

and I would dream the aisle an avenue
of trees where we'd go waltzing....

what I liked best was the purple -
made me think of churches, weddings,

as he played softly Tea for Two,
I've got you under my Skin.

After the matinee he'd take me for a drink
sometimes. Tell me about his wife.

Eleanor Maxted
(courtesy of Patricia Hawkins)

NEWS AND VIEWS

ANY PLACE WE SHOW OUR FILM IS HOME !

The Club's current publicity leaflet bears the headline "WNCC is moving!" but, if you've been a member for many years, your reaction may be "so what's new about that ?"

In fact, WNCC has hardly stopped moving throughout its existence. Before it even had its first show, a change of venue was necessary. Who knows, but for an unfortunate choice of film in that very first season, perhaps the Club might have found a permanent home at Winston Churchill School in St. Johns. As it was, the then headmaster took one look at the programme, saw it included Marlon Brando in the controversial 'Last Tango in Paris' and was adamant that nothing sexual was going to be done with butter on his school premises !!

As a result, the Club had to make a quick switch to the Committee Rooms in the now demolished Centre Halls where we pitched camp, (Divine in John Waters' 'Pink Flamingos', amongst others !), for our initial three seasons. Your committee was then persuaded that the lecture hall above Woking's library - also now demolished [was it something we did ? - Ed.] - was a more attractive proposition; which it was until the powers that be suddenly decided that they wanted the space for storage.

So, at the end of the fourth season WNCC transferred to the Litton Tree (known then as The Cotteridge Hotel) in Guildford Road, where we remained for six years. However, the distinct possibility that the hotel might be sold for redevelopment and its seating capacity having been exceeded on more than one occasion by the Club's rising membership, it was decided to take up residence at Goldwater Lodge. This Council-owned property offered room for expansion, generally improved facilities, equipment storage and was well managed. Unfortunately, it did not stay that way for long and the sorry tale of the Council's increasing neglect of the Lodge is still too recent and painful to recall.

After six years of watching the place go to rack and ruin, the Council found someone to take it off their hands and put it to other uses. With the promise of a brand new home in The Kemp Room at The H.G.Wells Suite, WNCC ended last year and the first part of this season in temporary residence at Beaufort Primary School.

That just about brings this moving saga up to date. Is the Club's new venue of The Kemp Room the answer to its prayers ? Being its sixth home in seventeen years one can but hope so !

Tony Rozelaar (Ex-Chairman and Honorary Life Member, WNCC)

SELECTION of SHORTS (6/3/97)

38 completed reaction sheets giving a score of 6.6 for the evening as a whole.

REACTIONS

A selection of your comments

Only enjoyed the animations at start and end.

Enjoyed animations and Woking films best.

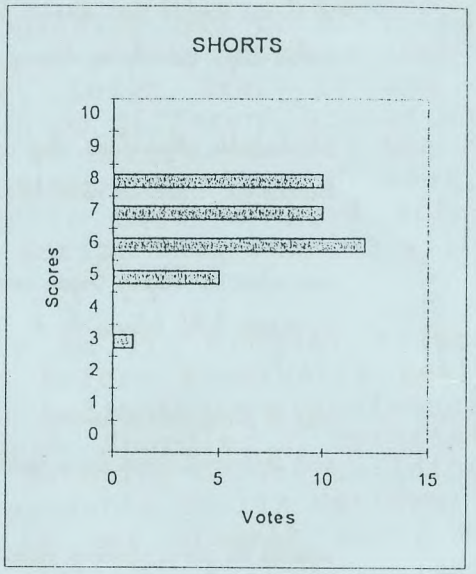
Une Partie de Campagne good.

Early Bird, In Cuba and Kafka were great.

Rather too many films.

In Cuba was best and most enjoyable (Oh those snake hipped men!!).

All good except the Cuban film-v. boring (v.v. boring)



A Curates egg but loved the Early Bird.

Fascinating and varied selection - Bravo.

Made a nice change to see more Shorts.

Worth repeating another year?

Special congratulations to John - 6 in one night!!

COMING NEXT

10 April 1997

DELIVERANCE

Starring: Burt Reynolds, John Voight, Ned Beatty and Ronny Cox.

at The Kemp Room, H.G.Wells Suite, Church Road East, Woking, commencing at 8.00 p.m.

Please note that this is a change from the advertised feature, due to circumstances beyond our control !

Performance Ends 10.20pm (approx.)

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