When we ran Fritz Lang's "Spies" a year or so ago, we lamented the passing from the screen of the European super-criminal, of which Dr. Mabuse was the prototype, and Dr. Fu Manchu an Asiatic off-shoot. These arch-criminals, whose genius for mass organisation usually culminated in complete insanity, owed allegiance to no nationality, and sought power and dominance as much for the sport of it all as for material gains. The post-World War 2 period, with the atomic age, made even Dr. Mabuse obsolete alas; the intrigues of secret treaties, murdered diplomats and conferences in the Balkans, seemed very small potatoes in view of the weapons of mass destruction which had succeeded Rudolph Klein-Bogge's time bombs and hypnosis-induced suicides.

England, or at least, English cinema, had never bothered itself too much with the arch-criminal. The individual spy or saboteur seemed much more folksy and typical of the English scene, even though like Mabuse, his motivations were not always too clear. And unlike Mabuse, he usually remained a gentleman, wishing his opponents good luck when they finally defeated him - as they did in "The Lady Vanishes". Of course, almost nobody on the screen remained a gentleman after World War 2, although there were pleasant reminders of this British genre in occasional British thrillers of the old school - "State Secret" with Douglas Fairbanks being one of the better ones. But the little thrillers of suburbia, of gigantic crimes performed by humble little people, of hideous secrets hiding behind the privet hedges of Kensington (what a delightful example of this school was "Strange Boarders") vanished as surely as had the international machinations of Mabuse and Hagi. In this program tonight we'll take a nostalgic look back towards the pleasant little murderers and spies that we grew up with in the thirties.

"THE WRECKER" (Gainsborough, 1929) Directed by Geza von Bolvary; screenplay by Angus MacPhail; from the play by Arnold Ridley and Bernard Merivale; released in the U.S. by Tiffany-Stahl Productions Inc. Starring Carlyle Blackwell and Benita Hume, with Winter Hall, Joseph Striker, Leonard Thompson, Gordon Harker and Pauline Johnson. 6 reels.

"The Wrecker" is a rousing old-style thriller of a hidden master criminal systematically putting the railroads out of business by engineering crackups and dollisions. Curiously, the Southern Railroad (operating between Waterloo and points South - Dover, Portsmouth, Southampton etc.) lent its cooperation to the filming, presumably using a lot of trains that they were bored with. The wrecks and derailings are the real thing, and remain quite thrilling. The public relations angle in all this is a little strange, even allowing for the fact that the British are not easily led into hysteria; presumably the fact that the wrecks are engineered to benefit a bus line persuaded the big boys of the Southern Railway that England's populace wouldn't take it all too seriously. One wonders how the advertising men of the Green Line and Southdown busses reacted! Anyway, for those of you that know England, the shots of English trains chugging through, and being splattered across, the Hampshire downs, should be nostalgically diverting.

The film has a great deal more style than its straight melodramatic story-line might have warranted under another director. Bolvary gives it a lot of Germanic lighting and angles, and one suspects that he had been quite impressed
by Lang's "Spionne", released in England, and very successfully, just the year before. Not knowing the original play, this is just a supposition, but even certain plot ingredients (the villain's particular use of the glamorous female agent) seem to bear more than a casual relationship to the Lang film.

Benita Hume, currently in the news again, makes a cool and attractive heroine, and it's interesting to note the presence, in a small part, of Gordon Harker, who in sound films was to achieve considerable popularity in comedy melodramas as a cockney comedian. Arnold Ridley, partially responsible for the story, was quite adept at railroad ing melodramas -- his best work along those lines being, of course, the famous "The Ghost Train", twice filmed by British studios. Under the title "Seven Sinners", "The Wrecker" was remade in 1936. Albert de Courville directed that version, with Lauder and Gilliatt scripting, and Edmund Lowe and Constance Cummings co-starring.

Our version of "The Wrecker", apparently a composite of several prints, obviously is not entirely complete, but not too much of importance is missing. It was released in both silent and sound versions; this silent one probably being shorter than the sound release anyway. Through the shortening of dialogue scenes, silent versions usually ran a reel or two less than their sound counterparts in those uneasy days of the lamentable changeover from silent to sound films.

"ALL HANDS" (Ealing Studios for the Ministry of Information, 1940) Written and directed by John Paddy Carstairs; produced by Michael Balcon; starring John Mills, with Lueen McGrath, Eliot Makeham, Hans Wengraf, Annie Esmond, Carl Jaffe, Gertrude Musgrove, Ralph Roberts. One reel.

If one is to accept films like this, and the features COTTAGE TO LET, NEXT OF KIN and WENT THE DAY WELL? as any criterion, Britain was over-run with Nazi agents during the war years; aristocratic landowners with centuries of tradition behind them were revealed to be would-be local Führers, while mild-mannered little tobacconists, and barty old ladies in pubs, were all secretly in the pay of the Gestapo. In retrospect it is a rather terrifying thought, and it makes one wonder how many of one's best friends went undiscovered in those hectic days. Certainly these one-reel propaganda melodramas seemed to suggest that the kinder one's neighbor, the more likely he was to be a potential enemy agent! However, they did their job well -- and, more important, entertainingly -- and kept audiences alert to the dangers of careless talk. Some of them contained a neat sense of humor (we'll be running one of these less serious ones shortly), and all of them were well put together by film-men, not propaganda men, and were acted by casts of established and popular players. This miniature tale of London's network of German spies is an interesting and quite impressive example of this now forgotten series.

"SABOTAGE" ("THE WOMAN ALONE") (Gainsborough, 1936) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, from Joseph Conrad's novel "The Secret Agent". Screenplay by Charles Bennett, continuity by Alma Reville; dialogue by Ian Hay, Helen Simpson; editor, Charles Frend; musical director, Louis Levy; additional dialogue by E.V.H. Emmett; photographed by Bernard Knowles; cartoon sequence, courtesy Walt Disney. 8 reels.

Starring Sylvia Sidney, Oscar Homolka, John Loder, with Desmond Tester, Joyce Barbour, Mathew Boulton, S.J. Warwington, William Dewhurst, Martita Hunt, Austin Trevor, Aubrey Mather, Torin Thatcher, Peter Pull.

Not seen in New York in some years, this vintage Hitchcock stands up quite
surprisingly well - much better, certainly, than "The 39 Steps", "Secret Agent" and "The Man Who Knew Too Much". In some ways it is even a better film than "The Lady Vanishes", though perhaps hardly a more entertaining one. It has far more directorial "touches" than Hitchcock's other films of the period, and a simple, uncomplicated story line that permits these touches to be better developed and exploited, and not merely used for their immediate effect. The cutting is brisk and exciting, and the locales, including the London zoo, often quite unique. And extremely interesting use is made of a movie-house as the base of the saboteur's operations.

(A wonderful program consisting of a western, a Disney cartoon, and a Tom Walls-Robertson Have farce, a few frames of which are glimpsed once, seems to have been held over for weeks at this particular cinema, presumably because the exhibitor was too busy planning to blow up London to book anything else!) And for once the movie background by-play is reasonably intelligent: the exhibitor provides himself with an alibi by explaining that he is going to a tradeshow, and a bomb is hidden in an empty film can. To make sure that it arrives at the right time at the right place, the exhibitor sends it by hand, explaining that it is illegal to carry nitrate film on a bus! Little details like this abound, and add immeasurably to the conviction of the whole!

To say more would merely spoil your fun, so we'll forego further comment except to remark that it is a good, complete print -- with the exception of a few hells and dammits, and the punch line of a rather blue remark, which have been discreetly excised from the track for American consumption.

Program Notes & enquiries:
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Committee: Edward Gorey, Sandra Everson, Charles Shibuk, Dorothy Lovell.

Next program - next Tuesday, December 23rd., 7.30., in room 11C

HERBERT BRENON - ALAN CHOSLAND - JAMES CRUZE
Interesting sound films of three giants of the silent screen

Brenon's THE HOUSEMASTER (1938) with Otto Kruger, Phillips Holmes, Diana Churchill
Cruze's I COVER THE WATERFRONT (1933) with Ben Lyon, Claudette Colbert, Ernest Torrence
"She Got What She Wanted", excerpt, (1930) with Lee Tracy, Betty Compson, Alan Hale
Crosland's "Silver Lining" (1931), excerpt, with Betty Compson, John Warburton.