

Mystery and Melodrama from the 30's

"THE CASE OF THE HOWLING DOG" (Warner Brothers, 1934)

Directed by Alan Crosland; from the novel by Erle Stanley Gardner; screenplay by Ben Markson; cameraman: William Rees; edited by James Gibbon. 8 reels.

Starring Warren William, with Mary Astor, Helen Trenholme, Allen Jenkins, Grant Mitchell, Dorothy Tree, Helen Lowell, Gordon Westcott, Harry Tyler, Arthur Aylesworth, Russell Hicks, Frank Reicher, Addison Richards, James Burtis, Eddie Shubert, Harry Seymour, Hooper Atchley, Joseph Crehan, Joe Sawyer, Jonathan Hale, Bill Elliott.

In 1934, Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason made a welcome addition to the already prolific parade of movie sleuths that included Sherlock Holmes, Philo Vance, Charlie Chan and Nick Charles. As an upright and strictly honest (if occasionally unethical) lawyer, he offered a striking comparison with the shady shyster lawyers of Claude Rains, John & Lionel Barrymore, William Powell (and Warren William too!) that had been rather overdone since 1931, and were now going out of fashion. Too, in handling crime as strictly a business -- Mason has a huge, efficiently run organisation -- he made a slightly more convincing and logical crusader than those amateur sleuths like Vance who did it all just for the fun of it. (Mason's slick operations and plush offices also make interesting comparison with the dingy little rooms later used as offices by Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe!)

The Perry Mason movies - there were six of them altogether, not counting the current tv crop with Raymond Burr - all represented exercises in neat mystery writing, in intelligent legal discussion, in gimmicks and in plot surprises. There was never much menace, little or no physical action, few thrills. The excitement came from the surprises in the stories themselves, and perhaps in a way they didn't altogether play fair with the audiences, since the solutions invariably evolved from information known only to Mason! However, they were enjoyable and extremely well-written films, and it is a pity that the plethora of private eye and crime films on tv has rendered this kind of material commercially useless for theatrical films today.

"The Case of the Howling Dog" was the first of the series, and the best. It has good production values, and is kept moving at a fast pace by Alan Crosland, who somehow lost prestige at Warners in the 30's and was no longer handed the plums as of yore ("Don Juan", "The Jazz Singer"), but who still went right along making solid lesser movies like this one. Even though this film is literally all talk, Crosland keeps his cameras moving and his pace fast, so that it never descends into the static doldrums of "The Canary Murder Case". Surprisingly though, there is no background music at all -- except on one occasion when the radio is turned on, and we are treated to a lively rendition of "Dames"! Warren William of course is the ideal Mason, with Dorothy Tree a charming and resourceful secretary. Mary Astor has comparatively little to do, and it is pleasing to find Allen Jenkins playing the fly-in-the-ointment cop as a competent but rather unpleasant type, instead of aiming at the usual dumb cop comedy.

None of the subsequent Perry Masons fell into the standardised "B" rut that overtook Philo Vance, Sherlock Holmes, Charlie Chan and most of the others. Though not exactly boxoffice blockbusters, the rest of the Masons maintained a high standard, and only the very last one showed signs of slipping, though it too was quite good. They were all quite long too, one of them reaching nine reels, and the shortest still being seven reels. For the record, the follow-ups to "Howling Dog" were, in order, "The Case of the Curious Bride" (1935, dir: Michael Curtiz), "The Case of the Lucky Legs" (1935, dir: Archie Mayo), "The Case of the Velvet Claws" (1936, dir: William Clemens), all with Warren William as Mason; "The Case of the Black Cat" (1936, dir: William McCann, with Ricardo Cortez as Mason) and "The Case of the Stuttering Bishop" (1937, dir: William Clemens, with Donald Woods as Mason). Warners made one other film from a Gardner story - in 1940 - "Granny Get Your Gun" with May Robson.

I n t e r m i s s i o n

"YOU AND ME" (Paramount, 1938)

Produced and directed by Fritz Lang; Screenplay by Virginia Van Upp from a story by Norman Krausa; camera - Charles Lang, Jr. Music by

Kurt Weill; musical direction - Boris Morros; musical adviser - Phil Bouteilje; lyrics by Sam Coslow; art direction - Hans Drier and Ernst Fegte; interior decorations by A.E. Freudeman; editor: Paul Weatherwax; Nine reels.

Starring George Raft and Sylvia Sidney, with Barton MacLane, Harry Carey, Robert Cummings, Roscoe Karns, George E. Stone, Warren Hymer, Guinn Williams, Carol Faige, Bernadene Hayes, Egon Brecher, Paul Newlan, Harlan Briggs, Joyce Compton, Blanca Vischer, Hetra Lynd, Jimmie Dundee, Terry Raye, Willard Robertson, Sheila Darcy, Margaret Randall, Jack Mulhall, Sam Ash, Ruth Rogers, Julia Faye, Arthur Hoyt, Cecil Cunningham, Roger Grey, Adrian Morris, Joe Gray, Jack Pennick, Kit Guard, Fern Emmet, Max Barwyn, James McNamara.

The "two against the world" motif - two young people, outside the law, battling a hostile society - was a popular one in the thirties, starting out in the heavy social dramas of the early thirties, becoming standardised into melodramas of the "Let Us Live" calibre by the late 30's, and petering out, back on the "social" level again, in such films of the mid-40's as "They Live By Night" and "Gun Crazy".

If not necessarily one of the best of this cycle, "You and Me", Lang's third American film, is certainly one of the most interesting and least standardised. Not too well received in 1938 (and largely forgotten ever since) it seemed at the time a weak follow through on "Fury" and "You Only Live Once", though the only real common denominator was the fact that Lang used Sylvia Sidney in all three films. It's easy to see why, in the context of the times, it seemed a let-down. Unlike the two previous films, it poses no serious sociological issues, and its basic plot is sheer "B" picture malarkey. Yet today, "You Only Live Once" emerges as a completely unreal picture, loaded to the hilt. A word of explanation here, a different attitude there, and its whole drab world of contrived ugliness and hostility would have fallen apart. It has the stylish, tricky, fascinating gloom of "The Informer" - which likewise seems less impressive today than it did in the 30's.

Since one expects little of "You and Me", one is constantly surprised. The story is hoke, and can be dismissed right away. Most of it is predictable, and even the rain falls on cue, at the moment of extreme desperation; But if this outgrowth of "I Am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang" and more directly "You Only Live Once" is less gutsy and more conventional in theme, it also contains some truly wonderful material that is pure Lang, and some of the best stuff that he ever put on film. As producer-director he seems to have had reasonable control and autonomy. Unlike Stroheim, he hasn't gone wild while in the driver's seat -- for the most part he gives Paramount what they want, a slick little drama, with the right mixture of pathos, romance and melodrama. But every so often, as if to compensate for this compromise, he lams into a sequence of such unexpected power that it takes one's breath away, and it is these surprise sequences that make "You and Me" such a rewarding experience today. One of them comes right at the beginning of the film -- a sardonic little montage, to Weill music. Later there's a marvellous, completely stylised sequence as the ex-cons gather on Christmas Eve and re-live their days in the Big House. For the rest, there are fascinating echoes of previous Lang films; the robbery of the store, the camaraderie of the crooks, their combined hunt for one man, all recall "M". The rather likeable quality of all the ex-cons (involving some surprisingly savage humor quite early in the film, as a convict turned shop salesman terrorises a child into buying an unwanted toy!) is another Lang trademark -- plus the almost total absence of law enforcement officers. The crooks settle their own disputes and handle their own executions. As in Mamoulian's "City Streets", it's perhaps a pity to see such style wasted on trite material -- but these days especially, what a pleasure just to see a personal style again! In its use of shadows and silhouettes, and especially in its use of sound in that prison flashback, it's often first-rate Lang -- and even its plot isn't so hard to take. When Sylvia Sidney uses a blackboard at one point to prove to the crooks, in black and white, that crime doesn't pay, one can afford to smile indulgently at the loaded example she uses, and wish instead that good old Mabuse would come lumbering in to make mincemeat of her theories by proving not only that crime should pay but also that crime should be enjoyed to the fullest for its own evil sake. But, after all, this was 1938, and not the real good old cinematic days! The cast is quite wonderful, full of old friends, and Sidney and Raft (who had played together before in "Pick Up") both work well under Lang's direction. "You And Me" perhaps isn't an important Lang film -- but in many ways it deserves to be remembered far more than some of those that are considered important.

----- William K. Everson -----