"Thunder in the City" (Columbia-Atlantic, 1937) Directed by Marion Gering; produced by Alexander Ensay; screenplay by Robert Sherwood, Abe Kandel and Akos Tolnay; camera: Al Gilks; special effects: Nat Halm; music: Miklos Rozsa; starring Robert Stack, with Ralph Richardson, Julli DeEste, Nigel Bruce, Constance Collier, Arthur Kennedy, Jennifer; Raymond, Elizabeth Inglis, Roland Drew, Cyril Raymond, Billy Bryay, Nancy Burne, Janes Carew, Everly Gregg; 7 reels.

"Thunder in the City" was virtually the last worthwhile film from Marion Gering ("Devil and the Deep", "Madame Butterfly", "Jennie Gerhardt") whose prolific directorial career came to a sudden halt in the late 30's, and whose subsequent work has sadly been limited to such fringe activities as doctoring and reshooting foreign imports, one of his more enjoyable films, "Thunder in the City" is one of the British films from the 30's that aimed at conquering the US market with US stars. Usually the efforts were doomed, because the only stars that the English studios could afford were those who had slipped badly. Robinson had slipped -- a little -- but was still a name to conjure with. His arrival in Britain was hailed as a major coup, and he was ballyhooed to the hilt with personal appearances. Fortunately, "Thunder in the City" -- an amiable spoof of US publicity methods -- combines both British charm and Yankee zip, and was a success on both sides of the Atlantic. Smartly written, with some rather new ideas, well acted and perfectly cast, it is a really enjoyable comedy-drama that is let down only by the rather uncomfortable heroine, who is difficult to photograph well, and is quite put to shame by all the veteran talent around her. She failed to make the grade in American "B"s too. But otherwise "Thunder in the City" is a solid if unpretentious success on all counts.

Intermission

"The Spy in Black" (Columbia, 1939) Directed by Michael Powell; scenario by Emeric Pressburger; additional dialogue by Roland Pertwee; from a story by J. Sheridan Clavell; camera: Bernard Brown; art direction: Frederick Pusey and Vincent Korda; music: Miklos Rozsa; produced by Michael Balcon; 8 reels.

With Conrad Veidt, Valerie Hobson, Sebastian Shaw, June Dupres, Marius Goring, Athole Stewart, Agnes Laughlin, Helen Haye, Mary Morris, Cyril Raymond, George Summers, Ray Petrie, Grant Sutherland, Robert Bendell, Margaret Moffatt, Torin Thatcher, Kenneth Warrington, Bernard Miles, Skeleton Knaages.

Released in the US as "U Boat 29", "The Spy in Black" is a thoroughly satisfying movie, full of solid craftsmanship, remembered with affection by all who have seen it, yet somehow passed over by the historians in favor of films like "Night Train to Munich" -- an enjoyable but far less accomplished thriller and much cruder in its production values use of obvious miniatures etc. It was an odd film to bring out in 1939 -- with Britain on the brink of war with Germany, a film with a German hero was odd timing indeed. Yet it was released after the war began, and proved a big success. Possibly with the full realities of war still in the future, the British found comfort in its "civilized" attitude to war, and in its depiction of the German as a sympathetic and gentlemanly opponent. An Englishman's Home is his Fortress propaganda at places took quite the opposite tack -- and was most unpopular. In any case, Veidt was popular in England at the time; his 1937 "Dark Journey" had been a bit hit and was still in circulation. "Spy" boosted his popularity and that of Valerie Hobson too; a year later they co-starred in another film for Powell, "Contraband" (US title: "Blackout"), a good World War 2 melodrama with Veidt as the Dutch hero. Thereafter of course Veidt found a whole new career playing Nazis in Hollywood. Valerie Hobson, who had been appearing in Hollywood films during the 30's, was riding high as Britain's most popular leading lady in '39 in terms of Boxoffice Magazine, still had that "First Lady" prestige. The supporting cast is exceptionally strong, and full of familiar faces -- including Skeleton Knaages, that old reliable of the Val Lewtoms, and one of the earlier movie Sherlock Holmes - Robert Bendell. (There's another Holmes on view in "Thunder in the City" -- dear old Arthur Wontner!)

Perhaps "The Spy in Black" scores most on its pictorial aspects, which inherit a great deal from the German cinema. Veidt cawstrapping as he leams against a wall reveals his own image, "Coca Cola" (1935), and as he strides the misty boat deck, "Nerofurti" springs to mind. And Powell's memorable number of tricky pictorial effects of their own -- the trunk tumbling downward for example -- while Powell's love of and experience with the sea shows through quite clearly in several beautifully composed and lit seascapes. Columbia turned out a handful of really first-rate British films in the 30's, even though most of the plaudits went to Gainsborough and Korda; "The Spy in Black" (and to a lesser extent, "Q Planes", also known as "Clouds Over Europe") is a good example of the really solid pre-war films to emerge from that studio. (Unfortunately, their wartime record, "Freedom Rally", "Unpublished Story" was quite another matter!)