Tuesday next, January 14th: John Ford’s "THE LOST PATROL" (1934) with Victor McLaglen, Boris Karloff, Beguiled Danny; and the first (and probably only) U.S. showing of an 8 reel B/B-C TV interview with Ford (1968).

January 7 1969
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE FACE AT THE WINDOW" (British Lion, 1939) Produced and directed by George King; scenario by Romer Fay and A. Rawlinson from the stage melodrama by Gene Fowler and General Horace Glendinning; 6 reels.

With Tod Slaughter, John Warwick, Marjorie Taylor, Aubrey Mallalieu, Robert Adam, Margaret Yardie, Lionel Henry, Wallace E veney, Kay Lewis, Billy Shine, Harry Terry.

We’ve written enough about Tod Slaughter’s stage and screen work in previous notes for repetition to be unnecessary here. Suffice it to say that he reached the peak of his career on film with his two films for British Lion in 1939/40, this one and the previously shown "Crimes in the Dark House". Although the full-blooded script and Tod’s performance hasn’t removed the same, the added production values provided by increased budgets—particularly in the fields of photography and lighting—gave these two films a gloss denied to his earlier, and later, independent films. Tod has the time of his life with this particular plot, which in addition to the customary villainy and lechery, has a colorful Paris background, a mildly science-fiction-inclined sub-plot, a caged dwarf, and sundry other niceties. Raymond Massey made a presumably more restrained version of the same melodrama for Twickenham Studios in 1952 incidentally.

"NUMBER 17" (British International Pictures, 1932) Dir: Alfred Hitchcock
Released by Wardour Films; Executive Producer, John Maxwell; scenario by Alma Reville, Alfred Hitchcock and Rodney Ackland, from the novel by Jefferson Farjeon and the play produced by Leon M. Lion; Camera: John Cox and Bryan Lengley; Asst. Director, Frank Mills; Music: A. Hallis; edited (picture and sound) by A.C. Hammond; 6 reels.

With John Stuart, Leon M. Lion, Anne Grey, Donald Calthrop, Garry Marsh, Barry Jones, Ann Cason, Henry Ca ine.

Hitchcock has always repudiated "Number 17" as being totally unimportant, and has bracketed it together with "Jamaica Inn" as a film he never wanted included in Hitchcock retrospectives—although the structure was academic, since until just recently, the film wouldn’t have been available anyway. In a way, it’s easy to see why today Hitchcock repudiates it—just as Lang repudiates some of his best work. It’s all style, and no content (which currently active directors seem to admire) and certainly has nothing to say. Everything is admittedly on the surface—but what a wonderful surface it is, especially if one exercises a little patience in the admittedly too measured first half. The last of Hitchcock’s B.I.P. melodramas—only "Waltzes from Vienna" stood between it and "The Man Who Knew Too Much", and the start of his great Gaumont period—"Number 17" is admittedly a shoe-string production, with budget seriously curtailed. And if "The Man Who Knew Too Much" seems a spectacular stride forward over a mere two-year-period, it is not least because of the much greater leeway (in casting, locations etc.) that its upped-budget provided. But "Number 17", even as it is, is a remarkable discovery, and not only a vigorous and imaginative piece of work which—even so early in Hitchcock’s career—is already a kind of spoof of his own speciality.

Most of the Hitchcockian trademarks are here: the mixing of melodrama with urbane comedy, ultra-civilized villains, a scattering of piquant sex (the two leading ladies are regularly and thoroughly searched), even such standard Hitchcockian situations as the hero and heroine shackled together. The opening too, is typical of Hitchcock’s contempt for logic if it serves no purpose. It’s a marvellously stylish opening—howling wind, a hat blown away, feet running outside, a mysterious man with curious drawing him inside. Within a few moments, and with no time wasted, the plot is underway, visually and excitingly. What matter if, five reels later, we find out that he was going to the house anyway? Based on a dull and unreadable novel by Jefferson Farjeon, the film is immediately transposed into a fascinating exercise in style. The first half of the film, all mood, shadows and suspense, shows just how much Hitchcock had learned from his association with the German film; it’s "Cat and Canary"—"Warming Shadows" stuff with a vengeance, full of moving camerawork, distorted shadows, bizarre lighting, and photographic composition which turns even the commonplace into the nightmarish. When a trampoline is lifted, steam from a railway train below floats menacingly upwards; a simple flight of stone steps, so lit that on a sees neither top nor bottom, suggests that Hitchcock remembered—and improved on—one of the atmospheric crypt sets in Browning’s "Dreadnought". It is as well that there is so much photographic elegance to dwell upon, for the mystery element in the earlier portion of this picture is not strong enough to hold an audience’s attention on its own. Then, in the middle portions, it comes to life with some fast-paced serial-like melodrama, and then launches itself into one of Hitchcock’s very best
and most exciting chase climaxes. "Climax" is perhaps too tame a word, since it takes the last third of the picture - and incidentally is a sequence not present in the original novel at all. A chase between a motor coach and a train, it builds beautifully, tracks on a spectacular wreck as an unexpected bonus, and is splendidly edited. Admittedly, it makes generous use of table-top and miniature work, and goes far beyond the use of miniatures as mere cutaways or establishing scenes, as Hitchcock used them in "The Lady Vanishes" and "Secret Agent". Here some of the most impressive scenes involve the prolonged use of miniatures, incredibly photographed in long sweeping tracking shots and with extremely complicated camera movements, all intercut most effectively with the real thing. One wonders what ever happened to these elaborate miniature sets and trains, and what lucky studio executive's son inherited them all!

If there is a major flaw in "Number Seventeen", it is the excessive footage given to the cockney comedy relief, Leon K. Lion, who also gets top billing in the cast. Not that he has any long comedy set-pieces - it's just that he seems in the way all the same, and his cockney dialect is sometimes quite hard to decode, given the already rather harsh sound recording of the day. The explanation of course is that Lion was not only an actor, but a notable theatrical impresario of the day, and had money and a production hand in the whole picture. He had produced "Number 17" on stage, and in 1932 had taken over the Garrick Theatre in London, where he had a considerable success in presenting a series of Galsworthy plays, headed by "Escape" and "Justice". So presumably one must give him credit for being a more creative gentleman than his work in this film might suggest.

We are hardly suggesting that "Number 17" is a rediscovered masterpiece - although Anthony Asquith's upcoming "Underground" might almost be so hailed - but it's rare to see an early Hitchcock or Lang that, in the light of their later work, doesn't emerge as anything more than a fascinating academic milestone. Lang's "The Spiders" really falls into that category - and, for me at least, so do Hitchcock's "The Lodger" and "Blackmail". But however many signposts it may have to Hitchcock's later work, "Number 17" needs no apology as a thoroughly entertaining thriller in its own right. Apart from the measured pacing in the earlier portions, it doesn't really dates, and in fact is often surprisingly slick technically. It's rare to find such an effectively atmospheric musical score in an early British talkie - and some of the technical effects are quite amazingly skillful. There's one split-screen effect, in which the wheels of an authentic train are linked with studio-shot footage of the villains clambering over the top of the train. It's so good it passes almost unnoticed - and is a good deal more professional than the rather shoddy special effects work in the current "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang"!

William K. Everson

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Plunder from the recent European trip includes the following films that will be included in the Huff programs starting March 11th: