**Two Melodramas**

"KING OF ALCATRAZ" (Paramount, 1938) Directed by Robert Florey
Original story and screenplay: Irving Reis; Camera: Harry Fischbeck;
Music: Boris Morros; 5 reels

Despite their famous slogan "If it's a Paramount Picture it's the Best Show in Town", Paramount's "A" features in the 30's were too often dull, padded and stodgy films made with both eyes on every possible economy. The glory that had been theirs in the pre-Cede days - West and Fields at their best, von Sternberg, Mamoulian, Lubitsch at their prime - was replaced by second-string work from DeMille, Leisen, Lloyd, Vidor, and it wasn't until the 40's - Sturges, Wyler, McCarey - that their over-all standards were given a much-needed shaking up.

But if there were too many dull "A"s in the 30's, there was no shortage of expert little "B"s - primarily fast crime and gangster films - and "King of Alcatraz" is a perfect example of the high standards that these little films achieved. Admittedly, Robert Florey (whose work we have shown and espoused on several previous occasions) was one of the best "B" directors in the business, always getting more out of his scripts than anyone had a right to expect. But quite apart from Florey's talent, "King of Alcatraz" is the product of a well-oiled machine, and it really didn't have to be as good as it is. It could have sailed along with half the pace and half the care, and probably still been a decent little picture that would have cost less - and grossed just as much.

But obviously, Paramount did care, and made maximum use of standing sets and contract talent to get the maximum dosage out of the humdest property. "King of Alcatraz" has no earth-shattering script nor even any unusual action sequences. But it moves, constantly; the players speak their lines as though they meant something, the standout camerawork and lighting is given all the precision and thought that Fischbeck gave to Griffith's "The Sorrows of Satan" a dozen years earlier; and the editing - following Florey's own pattern - is always brisk. No long dialogues take, no lengthy exposition - everything that happens keeps the story on the move, and gets it told well in a mere 56 minutes. As for the players, a full of contract players do their usual stints, stars-to-be (Quinn, Preston, Morgan, Denning) learning their trade, and grand old veterans (Gustav von Seyffertitz, Tom Tyler, Harry Worth, Monte Blue) delivering as expected, despite the slum of not even making the wrap-up cast-list, let alone the introductory credits. Today especially, when more and more films are deliberately cultivating a non-professional, off-the-cuff look - as though amateurism is a blood-brother to honesty - it's a real pleasure to sit back and watch the expertise of this supremely unimportant and eminently enjoyable little thriller.

"SOMEBODY IN THE NIGHT" (20th Century Fox, 1946) Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz; producer: Anderson Lawler; Screenplay by Mankiewicz and Howard Dimsdale, adaptation by Lee Strasberg, from "The Lonely Journey" by Marvin Brodsky; Camera: Norbert Brodine; Special Effects, Fred Serisen; 10 reels

When "Somebody in the Night" was released in mid-1946, it got excellent reviews, but was quickly forgotten. After all, it arrived towards the tail end of that ultra-prolific cycle of tough thrillers that encompassed the best of Hamsandt and Chandler, as well as the psychological and psychiatric mysteries dealing with maladjusted war veterans. Everything, seemingly, had been done; moreover, "Somebody in the Night" was a literate thriller, with less violence and action than most of its forerunners, and without an exciting personality (Bogart, Ladd, Powell) as its hero. It even avoided the then-fashionable meat commentary. But while the "Blue Dahlia" and "Dead Beakonings" have tended to date rather quickly, this one holds up well; extremely well. Its plot is well-woven, its dialogue thoroughly brush 1940's and a delight, and its performances still valid, especially the classic small-time villainy of Fritz Kortner. In every way, it is one of Mankiewicz's most under-rated works; it is also one of his least pretentious and one of his best.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---