Two thrillers by Robert Siodmak

Although we may hate to admit it, the time has come when we can look back at the films of the 40's with perspective and even nostalgia. Seldom has any given decade offered such extremes in both genuine artistry and incredible mediocrity. In one area though, the 40's were especially strong -- the thrillers. Whether modern crime or classic Gothic, they were a breed apart from the thrillers of the 30's, which tended to be more realistic, more dependent on personalities, possibly more fun. The thrillers of the 40's generally had more style though; studio-bound, literate, glossy, they created a nightmarish world of their own, and more and more, from "Somewhere in the Night" to "Mankurt", they can be seen to be holding up extremely well. Tonight's two films are very good examples.

"THE SPiral StAIRCASE" (Selznick-Rko Radio, 1945; red: 1946) Dir: Robert Siodmak
Produced by Dore Schary; Screenplay by Mel Dinelli from a novel by Ethel Lina White; Camera: Nicholas Musuraca; Music: Roy Webb; 8 reels
With Dorothy McGuire, George Brent, Ethel Barrymore, Kent Smith, Rhonda Fleming, Gordon Oliver, Elsa Lanchester, Sara Allgood, Rhys Williams, James Bell, Erville Alderson, Myrna Dell, Elizabeth Russell.

Siodmak was riding high in the mid-40's as a potential rival to Hitchcock and Lang as a master of the suspense film; actually his style was too lacking in humor to parallel Hitchcock, and had too much of the romanticism to equal Lang. Siodmak was actually closer to Welles; there's a great deal of "The Magnificent Ambersons" in "The Spiral Staircase", and "The Killers" of course owed a great deal to "Citizen Kane" - from its overall construction down to such details as Vince Barnett's makeup duplicating Welles' as the older Kane. "The Spiral Staircase" is a film of pure style rather than suspense; its romantic flavor, particularly in its (over-scored) musical themes, robs it of any chance of Hitchcockian sleight-of-hand, and the happy ending is too foregone a conclusion. The identity of the killer is obvious from the outset. But the elegance of its studio sets, its marvellous opening (one can forgive glimpses of Mae Marsh in Griffith's "Sands of Dee" being billed as "The Kiss"!), its two superb murder scenes, and its smooth and constant moving camerawork make this an essay in style very reminiscent of Leni's "The Cat and the Canary". No matter that the style isn't consistent, that the subjective camera views of the murder are really out of place, that one of the best camera movements in the picture - the vertical tracking shot (vertical horizontal tracking shot) from the top of the stairs - really has no point of view, and is just there for effect. Unlike the indiscriminate use of disparate styles in, say, the work of Sidney Furie, style for its own sake is quite legitimately employed in a bravura thriller of this type. The print is a little worn and sploopy, but is quite intact; it's still a good thriller, with sense enough to be brief and fast.

"CRiSS CROSS" (Universal, 1940) Directed by Robert Siodmak; produced by Michael Kreike; screenplay by Daniel Fuchs from an original by Don Tracy; Camera, Franz Planer; Music: Miklos Rozsa; 8 reels

One of Siodmak's last American films, "Criss Cross" seemed at the time rather a let-down. Coming on the heels of such big prestige films as "The Spiral Staircase" and "The Killers", it was regarded as little more than a pot-boiler, too similar to "The Killers" to be a step forward, too lacking in traditional action to be a good thick-ear melodrama. Yet how well it stands up today; rather better in fact than "The Killers", which tends to be too over-blown and conscious of its cleverness today. "Criss Cross" is taut, exciting, extremely well-written, and quite one of the best of the sleazy underworld films of the 40's, the closest Siodmak came to capturing the essence of Lang. Yvonne de Carlo - no giant among actresses it's true, but a versatile and much under-rated player, forever being dismissed as just another Maria Montez - gives a surprisingly strong performance. But then Siodmak was a whiz at beautiful babes who could be alternately touching and bitchy -- witness Ava Gardner in "The Killers", likewise one of her best performances. It's a pity he never got a crack at a real high-level femme-fatale vehicle, a la "The Letter". If "The Web", "The Dark Corner" and other thrillers of the 40's hold up as well as this one (and don't date as monstrously as "Lady in the Lake") it's going to be a real pleasure re-discovering many of them.

--- William K. Everson ---