Monday next, October 19: From 1932: CALL HER SAVAGE (Clara Bow) and THE MIDNIGHT MAID (Jessie Matthews)

October 12 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

One of our periodic looks at the "B" Picture: the Crime Melodrama, 1926-38

"DAUGHTER OF SHANGHAI" (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Robert Florey
Screenplay by Garnett Weston (from his original story) and Gladys Unger;
Camera: Charles Schoenbaum; Art Direction, Hans Dreier and Robert Ossial;
Musical Director, Boris Morros; 6 reels
With Anna May Wong, Charles Bickford, Carrol Naish, Larry Bostor Crabbe, Cecil Cunningham, Anthony Quinn, John Patterson, Evelyn Brent, Philip Ahn, Fred Kohler, Owy Batas, Port, Frank Sully, Benson Fong, Paul Fix, Charles Wilson, Pierre Watkin, Max Busch, Gino Corrado.

One of the joys of the mid-30's was to watch the G-Men aggressively combating the illegal importation of the Yellow Peril, and such thrillers invariably began with a sequence showing the wholesale dumping of a cargo of hapless Orientals from the smuggler's plane. Such lightning-establishing of plot and character served to stress the ruthlessness of the ganglords, and the general undesirability of being an Oriental. "Daughter of Shanghai" is a film from this genre, and one of the best. Like so many other Robert Florey films that we've shown ("King of Alcatraz" in particular), it moves like lightning, makes maximum use of Paramount facilities in terms of cast and standing sets, and is broken up into so many shots, all of them so flawlessly lit and composed, that it belies the stringent budget and shooting time allocated to it, and often has at least the superficial look of a Sternberg glossy. With its Italian-looking gangsters, its Oriental victims and a razor-wielding Negro valet, it should prove a field day for crusading minority-group agitators. The cast is a lulu, though misleading: top-billed Charles Bickford has but a few minutes somewhere in the middle of the film, while hero Philip Ahn is almost squeezed out of the cast entirely. Evelyn Brent and Fred Kohler get together for a few moments, doubtless musing over the days of former glory when, but a decade earlier, they both had key roles in von Sternberg's "Underworld.

- intermission -

"BORN TO BE WILD" (Republic, 1937; released, 1938) Directed by Joseph Kane
Associate Producer, Harold Shumate; Screenplay and original story by Nathaniel West; Camera, Jack Marta; Editor, William Morgan; Special Effects, Howard Lydecker; 6 reels

Republic could never give their films the production niceties that Paramount could, but they did stress sharp clear photography and a variety of angles in the briskly staged action sequences. Their actioners were thoroughly professional in every sense of the word particularly their use of miniatures and special effects, usually the work (as here) of Howard Lydecker, who died just recently after completing the incredible special effects work in "Torre Tora Tora". "Born to Be Wild" is "Wages of Fear"-good enough to overcome even the commercial and cultural misadventures of trying to turn Ralph Byrd, the movies' best Dick Tracy, into a singing hero. Unlike the other two films which are fully complete, "Born to Be Wild" has been trimmed by a few minutes to fit a specific tv slot: if you look for them, there are one or two plot gaps, but the film moves far too fast for them to be readily apparent.

"PUBLIC ENEMY'S WIFE" (Warner Brothers, 1936) Directed by Nick Grinde
Screenplay by Abem Pinzel and Harold Buckley from a story by P.J. Wolfson;
Camera: Eric Keller; 6 reels
With Pat O'Brien, Margaret Lindsay, Robert Armstrong, Cesar Romero, Dick Foran, Joseph King, Dick Purcell, Addison Richards, Hal Dawson, Harry Hayden, Alan Bridge, Kenneth Harlan, Selmer Howard, William Parley, Bill Elliott, Walter Walker, Eddie Featherstone, Carlyle Moore, Mary Treen, Jack North, Robert Gleckler, Paul Grazes, Leo White, Sam Flint, Stuart Holmes, Milt Kibbee, Lester Blake, Dennis O'Keefe, Spec O'Donnell, Emmett Vogan.

Released in Europe under the opposite but equally accurate title of "O Man's Wife", "Public Enemy's Wife" was issued in England on a double-bill with "Hollywood, to make a small boy's Saturday afternoon delight. I loved the film then, and while I appreciate its mechanical assembly-line drawbacks today, its verve, pace, and unrestrained use of the WB stock company still hold considerable appeal. William A. Howard remade it in the 40's as "Bullet for O'Hara" (with Roger Pryor, Anthony Quinn and much original footage). The action - crisscrossing Chicago - is frenetic and the gashly Inspiration Point moon used as a backdrop for Margaret Lindsay is oddly enough, more palpably phoney than the deliberately artificial moon used for her movie love-scene with Cagney in "Lady Killer"! Nick Grinde was always a hack, none of the style of Robert Florey - or even Joe Kane - but with the WB machinery behind him, he could hardly miss! - W.K. Eversen -