December 23 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two thrillers by Jacques Tourneur

BEIRN EXPRESS (Rko Radio, 1948) Produced by Bert Granet; Screenplay by Harold Bedford from an original story by Curt Siodmak; Camera, Lucien Ballard; 8 reels
With Merle Oberon, Robert Ryan, Paul Lukas, Charles Korvin, Robert Coote, Reinhold Schunzel, Roman Toporov, Peter von Zerneck, Fritz Kortner, Michael Harvey, Richard Powers (Tom Keene).

CIRCLE OF DANGER (Eagle Lion-David Ross-Coronado Productions, 1951) Produced by Joan Harrison; screenplay by Philip MacDonald; Camera, Oswald Morris; British title, "White Heather": 8 reels

Although his career now seems to be over, and his last handful of films tended to disappoint, Jacques Tourneur (son of Maurice) was one of the most interesting and exciting directors of the 40's, although unlike his contemporaries Jules Dassin and Robert Siodmak, he never seemed to be "in vogue" and never quite made it to the big time of commercial success or artistic acceptance.

At his best, he was very good indeed - particularly on sophisticated horror films ("Cat People", "I Walked with a Zombie", "Curse of the Demon") and a variety of Westerns - realistic ("Canyon Passage"), traditional ("Wichita") and romanticised ("Stairs in my Crown"). Not unnaturally, since he made so many thrillers, he sometimes overlapped into the territory of other specialists, and tonight's two films are good examples of Tourneur working in the manner of, first, Fritz Lang, and secondly, Alfred Hitchcock. He was undoubtedly closest to Lang in style - like Lang, there was no tongue-in-cheek fooling around, and you were expected to take his thrills very seriously. Also like Lang, he could be warm and a humanist - but he had Lang's shortcomings too, most notably a lack of a real sense of humor. It's a pity that Tourneur, who was probably Hollywood's finest maker of horror films since James Whale, had none of Whale's macabre irony. Tourneur's one deliberate attempt to weld comedy with horror - in "Comedy of Terrors" - was a heavy-handed failure.

Both of tonight's films were made in that post-war period when so many thriller plots revolved around the "cleaning up" of wartime intrigues or crimes, and when the influence of documentary styles and stress on location shooting was still very much in evidence. Both of tonight's films are rattling good thrillers, and don't need the pretense of being based on fact to bolster their appeal. "Berlin Express", a surprisingly unknown film, is a black, nightmare thriller entirely in the manner of Lang, its only flaw being that its hidden villain is entirely too obvious. "Circle of Danger" may owe much of its affinity with Hitchcock to the fact that Joan Harrison, a former Hitchcock associate, was the producer. It has rather more humor than "Berlin Express", but it is a humor omnipresent because of the script and the many players like Naunton Wayne performing in their familiar manner; one suspects that Tourneur merely tolerated the humor because it was there, and made no attempts on his own to develop it.

These notes are somewhat lacking in precision and specific detail simply because I haven't seen either film for at least ten years; in fact, taking a leaf out of James Card's modus operandi, I scheduled them because it seemed to be the only way I would find time to see them again - absent-mindedly forgetting that I would be in London when they were shown! Pressure of time before leaving precluded checking out the print of "Circle of Danger"; I had two prints on hand, and am using what seems to be the cleanest and better of the two. If my optimism should prove to be unfounded, please hurl your complaints at me and not at the innocent projectionist, Charles Shibuk, who is once again pinch-hitting in my absence.

William K. Everson