June 14, 1931

The Theodore B. Starr Memorial Film Society

Tonight’s coupling of two comedy-thrillers from the mid-30’s might well be termed ideal Huffman Summer programming; both films are basically unfamiliar, both are extremely entertaining, and both are also supremely unimportant, so that those who find Summer just too exasperating to consider in July by their air conditioners or swimming pools, and not feel that they have missed any major films. With the exception of next week’s program, and our French double-bill on July 12th., this basically is the format that we’ll stick with at least through, letting the blockbusters pile up (we hope) for an impressive Fall season.

“CRASHING HOLLYWOOD” (Rko Radio 1937, released 1938) Director: Lew Landers
Produced by Cliff Reid, screenplay by Paul Yawitz and Gladys Atwater from a story by Paul Dickson and Mann Pate; Camera, Nicholas Musuraca; 6 reels
With Lee Tracy, Paul Gullifogle, Joan Woodbury, Richard Lane, Lee Patrick, Bradley Page, Tom Kennedy, Frank M. Thomas, Jack Carson, Alex Craig, James Conlin, Walter Miller, George Irving.

The Lee Tracy "B" films for Rko in the late 30’s are an interesting and unappreciated group. There are certainly no hidden masterpieces among them, but they’re solid little films, well written and carefully cast, some of them remarks of earlier and bigger pictures (e.g., "Criminal Lawyer" out of John Barrymore’s "State’s Attorney") while others were themselves made as much lesser "B" pictures in the 40’s. "Crashing Hollywood", like so many "little" pictures about Hollywood ("Preview Murder Mystery", "Hollywood Roundup") contains a lot more honesty about day-to-day Hollywood than many of the much more ambitious pictures that were always striving for effect, carefully dropping a name here or a pseudo-documentary fact there. The "B"s had no time for that - they just got on with their story-telling, using undisguised studio sets and offices for their background. "Crashing Hollywood" is a particularly slick little picture, combining an amusing story-premise with good action and fast-paced dialogue, the Lee Tracy personality keeping everything hanging together rather nicely.

Director Lew Landers (ex-Louis Friedlander, of rather more imposing Universal programmers) was nothing if not prolific; he made no less than eight pictures for Rko in 1938, the others including a trio of Chester Morris thrillers and another very amusing movie satire, Lucille Ball’s "Amabelle Takes a Tour".

"STOLEN HARMONY" (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Alfred Werker
Produced by Albert Lewis; screenplay by Leon Gordon, Harry E. Buxton, Claude Binyon and Lewis Foster from a story by Leon Gordon; music, Harry Revel and Mack Gordon; dances, LeRoy Prinz; Camera, Harry Pashkevich; 7 reels

“Stolen Harmony” is one of those enjoyable minor pictures that succeeds because of rather than in spite of its many clichés, and yet at the same time changes mood and pace so often that it is never really predictable. It’s a musical, a regeneration drama and a gangster thriller all wrapped up in one, and one is never quite sure which aspect in going to - or is supposed to - dominate. Some of George Raft’s ex-con travails have all the Germanic heavy-handed thoroughness of a Fritz Lang effort, while the sudden, savage gangland climax as this quite lovable little people like Iris Adrian are casually murdered in a sequence as grim and stylised as anything in "Boardwalk" - provides quite a jolt. Pictures that thrive on sudden changes of mood, while yet retaining an overall consistency, have never been too successful. Preston Sturgess managed it in picture after picture, but apart from him one can only look to individual successes like "Bonnie and Clyde". "Stolen Harmony" doesn’t succeed in that sense, but it is a part of a curious, brief, mid-30’s cycle that tried to weld the gangster film with crazy comedy. "Roadside" and "The Texan" are the best of these pictures in that cycle, Lloyd Nolan was particularly useful in pictures like this due to his ability to switch from hearty geniality to cold-blooded killing in seconds, creating particularly chilling characters in such films as "She Couldn’t Take It" (where his cold-blooded murder of a helpless Wallace Ford was totally unexpeacted) and of course in Vidor’s "The Texas Rangers", where his shooting of Jack Oakie in the belly - from under a table, during a "friendly" conversation - became one of the best-remembered melodrama scenes of the 30’s. Don’t expect TOO much from this film - just sit back and enjoy its pace, its cast, lovely Grace Bradley, too rarely seen in a good part, the stylised photography of Pashkevich (who also did "The Sorrows of Satan"), and you’ll be amply compensated for Ben Bernie!