Three "B" Thrillers of the 40's


"Quiet Please Murder" would seem to have more than a few resemblances to "The Maltese Falcon", and perhaps therein is the problem: it's too literate and complex for a "B", yet not good enough in its basic material to be expanded into an "A". As such, it is somewhat of a parallel to Wellesis's "The Seventh Victim" -- a thoroughly fascinating and off-beat misfire. After a variety of locales in the opening reel, the ultimate restoration of action to public library seems excessively rigid, and in view of the richness and variety of characters and plot threads, the wartime propaganda line seems a bit extraneous too. The climax seems merely anti-climactic, until one realises that the picture is still going on, to be concluded via psychological rather than physical action. The late Gerald McDonald, head of the American History Dept. of the NY Public Library, once pointed out that Fox had a unit in the library researching library practices, and shooting footage -- but that despite this, the library's foot-foots for protecting rare books were totally ignored in this somewhat improbable yarn. The cast is exceptionally strong, with Denning and Gail Patrick in literal parallels to the Bogart-Astor roles in "Falcon", and the only real mystery left unsolved at the end is why any library should have a miniature tabletop model of the set of the Welsh village from "How Green Was My Valley".

"THE STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR" (Rko Radio, 1940) Directed by Boris Ingster; Produced by Lee Marcus; Original story and screenplay, Frank Partos; Camera, Nicholas Musuraca; 64 mins. With Peter Lorre, John McGuire, Margaret Tallichet, Charles Waldron, Elissa Cook Jr., Charles Halton, Ethel Griffies, Cliff Clark, Oscar O'Shea, Alex Craig, Otto Hoffman.

While the plot structure of this film is familiar enough, and Peter Lorre, in a recapitulation of his old "B" role, is in only for boxoffice name value and to fulfill a contractual obligation, the film itself is one of the most interesting "B" thrillers from any period. Like "The Informer", it creates all out of nothing -- a few standing sets, and meticulous and imaginative lighting in dream sequences, where space rather than sets achieves a genuinely nightmarish effect.

"MY NAME IS JULIA ROSS" (Columbia, 1945) Directed by Joseph H. Lewis; produced by Wallace MacDonald; screenplay by Furliel Roy Bolton from "The Woman in Red" by Rackham, rigid; Camera, Burnett Guffey; 65 mins. With Nina Foch, Dame May Whitty, George Naarey, Roland Verno, Anita Bolster, Leonard Mudie, Joy Harrington, Queenie Leonard, Harry Hays Morgan, Otto Olmsmith, Olay Hyttien, Ivan Thomas.

"My Name is Julia Ross" is one of the most famous "sleepers" of the 40's, and is in some ways an example of how crimes can be led around by the nose. Without minimising the excellent work of ex-editor Lewis in getting such paltry out of a minimal budget, at the same time, one can't but marvel that Columbia were aware of how well the film was progressing, provided him with extra (if not major) facilities, and then obtained for the film the kind of playdates that brought it to critical attention. As always - and "The Narrow Margin" is another case in point -- the critics went overboard, greeting it almost on a Hitchcockian level, and invariably creating audience disappointments when the film turned out to be good but hardly more than that. One would have much more respect for the "discoveries" of critics if they found (for themselves) those values of such real "B" films as for example Republic's "Mystery Broadcast", instead of the films like this one and Kornagram's "When Strangers Marry" which were always intended, by their studios at least, to be above-average products. But this distate is directed against the critics, not "My Name is Julia Ross", which is still an export if unsubtle movie. In fact one of its joys is the absurdly obvious behaviour of the villains (and especially psycho Naarey) and the rather dumber headed reactions of the lovely Miss Foch. Incidentally, many of the "old English mansion" exteriors were shot at Beverly Hills' Greystone Manor, now the scene of equally sinister but far more laudatory goings-on as the West Coast headquarters of the American Film Institute.