MURDER IN TRINIDAD (Fox, 1934) Directed by Louis King; screenplay by Seton I. Miller from the novel by John W. Vandercook; Camera, Barney McGill; 7 reels With Nigel Bruce, Heather Angel, Victor Jory, Murray Kinnell, Douglas Walton, J. Carroll Naish, Claude King, Patrick Scannard, Francis Ford, John Davidson, Noble Johnson. NY premiere: Mayfair Theatre

1934 was a popular year for movie murders; quite apart from Charlie Chan, Philo Vance and the other busy detectives, we had "Murder at the Vanities", "Murder in the Museum", "Murder in the Private Car", "Murder in the Clouds", "Murder on the Blackboard" and of course tonight's Trinidad murder. It was the first and easily the best (admittedly not too difficult a feat) of the three versions of the Vandercook novel, which later saw more standardized usage as the basis of "Mr. Moto on Danger Island" and then "The Caribbean Mystery". Although the mystery element is not very profound, the villain's identity fairly easily discernible, it is a good-looking and carefully made production, well mounted and especially well cast. Nigel Bruce is particularly good as a unique kind of detective hero, slovenly and untidy - both in his manner and sometimes in his thinking - yet withal quite shrewd. TV's current Columbo is cut from much the same but far more formulaic pattern, and there's a good deal more warmth and humanity in Nigel Bruce's performance.


While today "The Cat's Paw" seems like Lloyd's major mistake in the sound era, it was well received in 1934, both by critics and by audiences. It would seem though, that Paramount had misgivings about it, and it is surely no coincidence that it is the only one of Lloyd's 30's films not to be handled by Paramount. Presumably with the Marx Brothers, Fields, Keely West (and Lubitsch) at their peak, Paramount felt no need for a comedy of lesser stature, whereas Fox, always weak on comedy, were probably glad to add it to their schedule. The film is a curious foray into the world of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges, though in fairness to Lloyd, this was before either Capra or Sturges took on political satire. The Kelland story suggests Capra, and the lead is clearly a James Stewart/Gary Cooper type, but at the time it must have seemed a good deal fresher than it does now. Whatever its shortcomings, it was no accident. Lloyd's prior film, "Movie Crazy" of two years earlier, had contained far more standard gag material, and Lloyd had announced that this would be a different kind of film for him, avoiding sight gags, and working rigorously to a script for only the second time. (Presumably, though he didn't say so, "The Freshman" was the first). One must give him credit for trying something new, and perhaps even for partially pulling it off in 1934. (There are those who are fond of it even today, and it may well be that my critical comments, based on non-audience screenings, are unjust. Lloyd films have a knack of working much better with an audience). But for all of its ideas and fresh approaches, it's a downer to have to admit that it is very talkative, very long, and not really very funny. It's officially a 12-reeler, and so identified on the leaders, but it actually boils down to nine very full reels in actual footage, so possibly Lloyd did do a great deal of cutting. It comes to life in the climax, but only comparatively so, and has none of the exuberance of the traditional Lloyd climaxes. It also gradually reveals itself as another one of those Fascist-inclined early talkies, which keep re-appearing ("The President Vanishes", "Gabriel Over the White House", "OK America", "This Day and Hour") advocating police state methods to clean up gangsterism and corruption. Lloyd's method turns out to be a fake decent in any way minimise the bite of this sequence. It's a quiet, leisurely, but ambitious film, by no means a waste of time despite its histrionic pace, and it's particularly good to see Una Merkel in a decent, non-dizzy blonde role again.

Wm. H. Evereson

Erratum: Noble Johnson's name somehow crept into the cast list for "The Cat's Paw"; he is in "Murder in Trinidad", but not in the Lloyd.