Best program: May 9th: Two from 1932: Till Death Us Do Part with Constance Bennett & Joel McCrea; McBride, from the Donald Ogden Stuart play, with particularly good performances from Ina Claire and Lynn Lash.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
April 25 1977

Two with Richard Dix, 1931-1939

THE PUBLIC DEFENDER (RKO Radio, 1931) Directed by J. Walter Ruben; Scenario by Bernard Schubert from "The Splendid Crime" by George Goodchild; Camera: Edward Cronjager; Art Director: Max Rej; Producers: William LeBaron; Associate Producer: Louis Sarecky; Edited by Archie Marshek; 7 reels


One approaches most RKO films of 1930-31 with some trepidation, expecting academic research as a benefit rather than entertainment. But "The Public Defender", while rediscovered gen., is at least an exception not only to that generalisation, but to another one as well - that J. Walter Ruben's films (including those made in England) were generally flat and dull. But once in a while Ruben would come up with a surprise, the biggest and best being his "Trouble for Two" at MGM. However, tonight's film is a surprise too, on more counts than one. First, it's unusual in the midst of the big and basically realistic crime-gangster cycle, to find this fanciful piece of hokum which is both an echo of "Lassie" and a forerunner of "Batman". Too, although it is not exactly action-packed, it serves. The movie's plot is told at a fast clip, and individual sequences are short, and themselves broken up into brief shots. Ruben gives it far more pacing than most RKO's of the period, and "Kong" editor Archie Marshek perhaps makes it even tighter. It's an expensive-looking production too, with spacious sets and photography that is full of fancy angles, mobility, and atmospheric lighting. Another bonus is the very interesting performance from Boris Karloff, in a part much bigger than his bottom half of the cast billing might indicate. Too bad that, like most lesser RKO's, it is available only from the 16mm TV negatives. A really sharp print might make it all the more impressive.

Suffice to say that it's a good Dix vehicle, with enough bonus elements to make it a very pleasant surprise.

HERE I AM A STRANGER (20th Century Fox, 1939) Directed by Roy Del Ruth; Associate Producer: Harry Joe Brown; Camera, Arthur Miller; Art Direction, Richard Day and Rudolph Sternad; Screenplay by Milton Sperling and Sam Hellman from an original story by Gordon H. Milliman; 8 reels

With Richard Dix, Richard Greene, Brenda Joyce, Gladys George, Roland Young, George Zucco, Edward Norris, Kay Aldridge, Henry Kolker, Minna Gombell, Richard Bond, Frank Darvin, Robert Homans, Charles Wilson, Robert Shaw, Robert Kalloff, Harry Hayden (voice only).

Although we weren't too aware of it at the time, 1939-40 was giving us a major cycle of "big" emotional stories, ranging from stage plays ("The Old Maid"), current best-sellers ("My Son, My Son", "Disputed Passage") and remakes of old standards ("The Way of All Flesh"). "Here I Am A Stranger" fits into this group, perhaps all the better for not being too ambitious. If it's a soap opera, it's an intelligent one, well acted, and with a number of surprises - among them a realistic depiction of campus life for once! Richard Dix, the still not retired from heroic roles (he had a number of good Harry Sherman westerns ahead of him) has a beauty of a character role here, and rises to the occasion superbly. George Zucco for once appears to be a decent sort of a chap, but a little nastiness is allowed to creep in! Directed by Del Ruth still had some 15 years of film-making ahead of him, but this was one of his last really interesting films - although the credit belongs perhaps more to the team-work of the cast and the always excellent camerawork of Arthur Miller. As an illustration of the speed of production and distribution then, it's worth noting that his prior film ("The Star Maker") and Brenda Joyce's ("The Rains Came") were both released in the same month as "Stranger", September '39.