Unlike today, when the prestige of billing calls for half-a-dozen players to be "starred" in a film, and the contractual credits are further complicated by sundry "guest star" and "also starring" billings, stardom in the 20's and 30's really had to be earned. Tonight's two films - unimportant but expert crime melodramas, both directed by Roy Del Ruth - are good examples of the solid little programmers that were utilised at Warner Brothers to introduce and develop new contract players.

"Taxi!" (Warner Brothers, 1932) Dir: Roy Del Ruth; screenplay by Kubec Glasmon and John Bright from the play "Blind Spot" by Kenyon Nicholson; Camera: James Van Trees.
With James Cagney, Loretta Young, George E. Stone, Dorothy Burgess, Ray Cooke, Guy Kibbee, Matt McHugh, Leila Bennett, George Raft, Nat Pendleton, Berton Churchill, David Landau, Donald Cook, Evelyn Knapp.

Following the success of "The Public Enemy" Warners found themselves in the awkward position of having a dynamic new personality in Cagney with an aggressive, cocky manner that appealed to the public, but that properly belonged in the villain roles that would prevent his ever becoming a really top star. "Taxi", his first star-billing role, was also the first of a series of uneasy hero roles in which Warners attempted to harness the Cagney viciousness to roughnecks who were basically on the side of the law. In time enough humor crept into the characterisation for it to pay off, but initially the Cagney image was a rather unpleasant one. In an attempt to duplicate the grapefruit squashing film-sound "The Public Enemy" Cagney is called upon to mete out excessively rough physical and verbal treatment to Loretta Young, but without the same motivation, the result is a loss of sympathy for Cagney. And his conduct in the film's climax would certainly have earned him a healthy prison term a couple of years later when the Production Code boys were a little stricter! That factor apart, however, the film is good fun, a rowdy and uninhibited mixture of melodrama, action and comedy. A Pre-Code movie with a vengeance, all of the racial tabus are cheerfully broken and the dialogue includes a barked thrust at the Warner Brothers for having lost Gable - while a visit to a movie theatre (Cagney doesn't like any of the stars!) puts several Warner top-liners in their places! The dialogue is authentically 1930 (anyone Cagney dislikes is automatically a "wet smack") and the tale is told with zip and brevity. Incidentally it was remade in 1939 as "Waterfront" with Dennis Morgan in the lead - and a much toned-down script had the hero reformed by an obnoxiously zealous priest.

"Bureau of Kissing Persons" (First National, 1933) Dir: Roy Del Ruth; screenplay by Berton Freund from a story by Captain John Ayres; Camera: Barney McGill.
A pocket con-man-robers "Grand Hotel", this film marked the debuts of both Bette Davis and Pat O'Brien at Warner Brothers, and - if not in quite the same league - has the irreverence and cackling pace of the same director's classic "Blessed Event". Potentially grisly material is made genuinely funny by tasteful handling and underplayed delivery, and the black humor is punctuated by that inevitable pre-Code question, "Have you been smoking hooch?". Fast-talking Pat O'Brien and dignified Lewis Stone (borrowed from MGM) make a fine team, and Stone, faced with the problem of tracking criminals who use a carrier pigeon comes up with a solution worthy of Dick Tracy: "Catch that pigeon ... then take a fast plane and follow it!" The already fast-paced story is further speeded up by such devices as the iris-cut, the swish-pan and the habit of starting scenes without establishing shots, cutting right into an opening door and thus into the action. Incidentally the supplementary plot-lines of two earlier 1933 releases - "The Sphinx" and "Footlight Parade" - are casually plagiarised and thrown in for good measure. Years of contractual squabbles and mediocre films lay between this and the big Davis/Warner blockbusters...but this is where it all began. -- W.K. Everson--