"NUMBER 17" (British International Pictures, 1932)
Directed by Alfred Hitchcock; Executive Producer, John Maxwell
Scenario: Alma Reville, Alfred Hitchcock and Rodney Ackland, from the novel by Jefferson Farjeon and the play as produced by Leon N. Lion; Camera: John Cox, Bryam Langley; Asst. Director, Frank Mills; Music: A. Hallis; editor, A. C. Tebbutt; 5 reels.
With: John Stuart, Leon N. Lion, Anne Grey, Donald Calthrop, Carry Marsh, Barry Jones, Ann Casson, Henry Caime. (First public showing in the United States)

Hitchcock has always repudiated "Number 17" as being unimportant, and has bracketed it together with "Jamaica Inn" as a film he wanted excluded from all Hitchcock retrospectives - although the structure was academic, since until just recently the film was unavailable. In a way, its easy to see why Hitchcock rejects it - just as Tippi Hedren rejects so many of his own pictures. It's all style and no content (which currently active directors seem to adore) and certainly has nothing "to say". Everything is very much on the surface but what a wonderful surface it is, especially if one is prepared to exercise a little patience in the admittedly too-measured first half. The last of Hitchcock's B.I.P. melodramas - only "Waltzes from Vienna" stood between it and "The Man Who Knew Too Much" which launched his great Gaumont-British period - "Number 17" is literally a shoe-string production, with budget seriously curtailed. In "The Man Who Knew Too Much" the director firmly forward-looking and two-year period, it is not least because of the much greater advantages (in casting, sets, locations etc.) that its unproduced production cost provided. But even as it is, "Number 17" is quite a remarkable discovery, not only a vigorous and imaginative little film but also one which - even so early in his career - is already a spoof of his own speciality.

Co-screenwriter Rodney Ackland has told how Hitchcock deliberately kidded the original serious property, somewhat in place because he actually wanted to do something else. Since he felt all movie heroines were "dumb", he made this one literally dumb through the bulk of the film. When the reined him in later, the plot, that was whistled in the casting, was casually dismissed as "a crook's trick". Expecting his bosses to be annoyed with him for having satirised their straight-thriller, Hitchcock found to his chagrin that they took it all quite seriously and were perfectly satisfied.

Most of the Hitchcockian trademarks are here: the mixing of melo-drama with urban Comedy, ultra-civilized villains; a spotting of piquant sex (the two leading ladies are thoroughly and systematically searched!), even such standard Hitchcock sights as the hero and heroine shackled together. The opening too, is typical of his contempt for logic when it serves no purpose. It's a marvellously stylistic beginning - wind, flying leaves, a hat blown away, feet running after it, hat and owner coming to rest outside a mysterious mansion, and curiosity drawing him inside. Within a few moments, with no time wasted and not a word spoken, the plot is underway, vividly and excitingly. What matter if, five reels later, Fred finds out that he was going through a house and a haphazard plot line, the film is transposed into a fascinating exercise in style. The first third of the film, all mood, shadows and suspense, shows just how much Hitchcock had learned in his association with the German film. It's "hunting shadows" - "The Cat and the Canary" stuff with a vengeance, full of moving camerawork, distorted effects, bizarre lighting and photographic composition which turns the commonplace into the nightmarish. Then a trapdoor is lifted, steam from a railroad engine comes roaring in, a slow flight of stone steps so lit that one sees neither top nor bottom, suggests that Hitchcock remembered (and improved on) one of the atmospheric crypt sets in Tod Browning's "Dracula". It is as well that there is so much photographic elegance to dwell upon, for the mystery element in the earlier portions of the film isn't strong enough to hold much attention on its own. Then in the middle sections, it comes to life with some fast-paced serial-like melodrama, and finally launches itself into one of Hitchcock's very best chase climaxes. "Climax" is perhaps too strong a word to use it occupies the final third of the picture and incidentally is a sequence not present in the original novel at all. A chase between a motor coach and a train, it builds beautifully, uses excellent sound effects, talks on a spectacular wrench as an unexpected bonus, and is splendidly edited. Admittedly, it makes generous use of table-top and miniature work, and goes far beyond their use as mere cutaways or establishing scenes as Hitchcock used them in "The Lady Vanishes". Here some of the most impressive scenes involve the prolonged use of miniatures, incredibly photographed in long, sweeping, tracking shots with extremely complicated camera
movements, all intercut most effectively with the real thing. One wonders what ever happened to these elaborate miniature trains, and what lucky studio executive's son inherited them all!

If there is a major flaw in the film, it is the excessive footage given to the cockney comedy relief, Leon H. Lion, who also tops billing in the cast. Not that he has any long comedy set-pieces, but too much of his screen time seems to be the same all the time, and his dialect is sometimes quite hard to decode, given the already harsh sound recording of the day. The explanation is that Lion was not only an actor but a notable theatrical impresario, and had money and a production hand in the whole picture. He had produced "Number 17" on stage, and in 1932 had taken over the Garrick Theatre in London where he had a considerable success in presenting a series of Galsworthy plays, headed by "Escape" and "Justice". So presumably one must give him credit for being a more creative gentleman than his work in this film might indicate.

We are hardly suggesting that "Number 17" is a rediscovered masterpiece - although "Underground" (to be shown on December 5) might be so hailed - but it's rare to see an early Hitchcock (or Lang) that, in the light of their later work, doesn't emerge as anything more than a fascinating academic milestone. Long's "The Spiders" falls into that category, and so do Hitchcock's "The Lodger" and "Blackmail". But despite its cheapness and all of its signposts to later, more polished Hitchcock films, "Number 17" needs no apology as an entertaining thriller in its own right. Apart from the slow racing at the beginning it doesn't date unduly and is surprisingly slick technically. It's rare to find such an atmospheric musical score in an early British talkie - and some of the technical effects are amazingly skillful.

There's one use of split-screen in which the wheels of an authentic train are linked with studio-shot footage of the villains climbing over the top of the train, that is so good it passes almost unseen - and is a good deal more professional than the shoddy special effects work in the current "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!"


Although quite a brilliant film within its own genre, "Fog Over Frisco" is a virtually unknown one. Admittedly, for theatrical reissue and television usage, it poses problems - its 68 minute running time automatically pushes it out of the key slots, while the fact that star Bette Davis is casually murdered two-thirds of the way through certain most audience-undesirable segments into seeing it on the basis of its being a 'Davis' vehicle! Davis' demise is unfortunate since she is the most dynamic character in the film, but happily the film is good enough to surmount even that. Its plot is as full of complications and seemingly extraneous characters as the much later "The Big Sleep" - but what gives it such real distinction is its SPEED. While its actual physical action content is limited to a fast chase near the end, I don't think I've ever seen a faster film. This chase in it is subordinated to a character conflict with a crackling pace. Characters aren't so much introduced as hurled at the screen - Bette Davis makes her appearance from behind a screenful of popping balloons, a device that Dieterle obviously liked since he also used it earlier to introduce Marilyn Miller in "Her Majesty Love". Everybody's dialogue is cut to the bare-bones essentials, and spoken at an almost hysterical pace. The camera is constantly restless, following and preceeding the characters. A woman's screams are intercut with police sirens. And those who think that the French Nervos are responsible for the elimination of transitional devices will note that there are almost no transitions here. Dialogue overlaps, scenes cut right into action, other scenes begin with the camera already pulling back, while the optical wipes and dissolves, deliberately designed to match the action (exits, opening doors etc.) almost seem to be chasing people off the screen. In a story sense, it has a nice, evil, corrupt air, somewhat akin to the best of John Huston, but it's the dynamic racing that makes it one of the best and most striking films from the most interesting and widely varied period of versatile Dieterle's career.

--------- Wm. K. Everson ---