"THREE SMART GIRLS" (Universal, 1936; rel: 1937) Directed by Henry Koster
Produced by John Koster; Associate Producer, Joe Pasternak;
Screenplay by Adele Comandini, Austin Parker; Camera, Jos. Valentine; 8 rls
With Deanna Durbin, Nan Grey, Barbara Read, Charles Winninger, Ray Milland,
Alice Brady, John King, Ernest Cossart, Mischa Auer, Robert Cavanagh, Lucille
Watson, Nella Walker, Selmer Jackson, Barbara Pepper, Albert Conti, Wade
Botelk, Franklin Pangborn, Robert Homans, Heinie Conklin, Joyce Compton,
John Hamilton, Lane Chandler.

Although not strictly a musical - there are only three vocals, and one of
those is dragged in by the heels - "Three Smart Girls" is nevertheless
important in being the first of the highly popular Durbin vehicles that were
soon to steal much of the boxoffice limelight from the hitherto unchallenged
(and much more elaborate) Astaire-Rogers films. For all their musical
virtuosity and skill, the Astaire-Rogers films had an irritating kind of
conceit and condescension to them. Their plot-lines were flimsy almost to the
point of arrogance, as though audiences would accept anything for the
privilege of being entertained by such perfectionists. The Durbin films, in
contrast, had genuine warmth and gaiety. Their plots were also flimsy, but
they were pleasingly flimsy. "Three Smart Girls" could certainly get by on
its overall charm, mild comedy and likeable performers. "Swing Time", on
the other hand, would be a disaster without its music. Needless to say, the
formula couldn't last forever. After a few years, the charm of the Durbin
films became forced and artificial too, and the Durbin mannerisms too
calculating. But for the first half-dozen films they were delightful, and
"Three Smart Girls" - though not blessed with the superior production values
of such later ones as "First Love" - is both typical and highly entertaining.
It is also something of a monument to efficient type-casting: all of our old
favorites from the 30's are there, and all doing the kind of things we best
remember them for. They are not themselves, all looking a little older and
sexier than they were probably supposed to - are all fresh and appealing.
Barbara Read especially was a real charmer at this stage, and it's sad to
recall that within just a few years she was playing tough, trash sob-sisters,
and not even playing them well. Even the story has a certain social value,
being from that late 30's "ignore the depression" period when most movie
families seemed to belong to the international set, taking night-clubs,
cruises and homes in Switzerland as a matter of course.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

"LADY ON A TRAIN" (Universal, 1945) Directed by Charles David; produced by
Felix Jackson; Associate Producer, Howard Christie; screenplay by Edmund
Beloin from a story by Leslie Charteris; Music: Miklos Rosza; Camera,
Woody Bredell; Special Effects, John P. Fulton; 9 reels
With: Deanna Durbin, Ralph Bellamy, Edward Everett Horton, Dan Duryea,
George Colouris, Allen Jenkins, David Bruce, Patricia Morison, Maria
Palmer, Elizabeth Patterson, Samuel S. Hinds, William Frawley, Jacquesine
de Vit, Thurston Hall, Clyde Fillmore, Ben Carter, Mary Forbes, Sarah
Edwards, Nora Cecil, Robert Cavanagh, George Lewis, Al Lehue, Tom Dugan,
Stuart Holmes, Eddie Dunn, William Desmond.

Although it undoubtedly made money, "Lady on a Train" was dismissed by both
audiences and critics of the day, and generally regarded as no more than
another misfire in the then slipping career of Miss Durbin. While, to a
degree, one can understand the reception it got in 1945, it is hard to
understand why (like, for example, "Beat the Devil") it didn't at least
acquire a belated reputation. Perhaps it might have if some of the creative
personnel attached to it had later graduated to an "A" hierarchy, but none of
them did. The reasons for its comparative rejection at the time aren't
too hard to fathom. Durbin still had her faithful following, and fans
reared on "Three Smart Girls" and "Spring Parade" didn't take kindly to
their girl being given a sexy buildup and dumped into a murder mystery.
Also, Deanna was undeniably if pleasantly plump, and neither her earlier
image nor her current shape really suited her new sexpot buildup.

Second, and more important, the film itself seemed out of step. It was a
throwback to the gaily lunatic comedy-thrillers of the '30's - the mixing
of personnel attached to it had later graduated to an "A" hierarchy, but none of
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brief glimpse to launch the heroine's private investigation - and to cause the killer enough concern to try to get rid of her before she tracks him down. Unusual care seems to have been taken in all aspects of production.

The sets, especially the night-club and the inevitable old mansion, are quite remarkably lavish for economy-conscious Universal. The camerawork is first-rate, with Deanna the recipient of Grade-A glamor treatment via intricate back lighting and a mobile camera that literally caresses her in soft closeups and gliding dolly shots. The dialogue is snappy and bright, especially from Edward Everett Horton, and the cast well chosen. The fairly intelligent shifting of suspicion from character to character is adroit and well above normal Hollywood mystery levels, being let down only by infallible type-casting which gives the game away as soon as the killer appears in all his smiling, solicitous charm. But doubtless Universal felt that Miss Durbin's particular following would not have seen enough mystery movies to be suspicious of so amiable a gentleman. We'll not give the game away here, but anyone who doesn't guess the identity of the killer right away deserves to be berated around the New School on a rail, an object of scorn and derision for all.

There's a lot of Hitchcock in the film, particularly in the use of innocent (yet not common) settings as a background to scenes of menace; piles of white grain take on a nightmarish quality when a murder attempt is played out against them. And the film really moves; the fights are brisk and energetic, there are constant changes of location; melodramatic sequences have frequent neat and unexpectedly comic wrap-ups. As in those other (British) comedy-thriller classics "Green for Danger" and "Bulldog Jack", the overall levity does not intrude into episodes of genuine menace, which are all the more effective for the sudden change of mood. Deanna, plump or not, still looked very lovely and sang a trio of deliberately varied songs very effectively. An attempt was obviously made to return, in adult framework, to the same kind of character that she projected in "One Hundred Men and a Girl" and other earlier vehicles: overly-eager and energetic, intrusive and a bit bothersome. Her own charm and a stable of reliable veterans kept her youthful ebullence in check in earlier days, and the same necessary check works here. Incidentally, her final fadeout closeup is an effective period to a comic-erotic gag that belongs to the earlier Lubitsch period, and was quite rare in the 40's.

The film is so enjoyable on so many levels that one regrets all the more that it was the only major American film of Frenchman Charles David - who had worked on French films throughout the 30's, came to Hollywood in the war years as an assistant to Alexander Korda, Jean Renoir and Rene Clair, and finally turned to directing himself. His unusual "River Gang" (more interestingly titled "The Fairy-Tale Murders" originally, an an interesting parallel to "Lady on a train" in that it was a thriller vehicle for Gloria Jean, Deanna's lesser rival) came out just a month or so later. But if David's Hollywood career got nowhere, there was some consolation in his sharing of Miss Durbin as his bride. (She had been married to her then husband Jack Jackson, but since Jackson's death Miss Durbin are still happily married in France, where she is reportedly more pleasantly plump than ever, but has absolutely no interest in her old films and career, no affection for them, no desire to be interviewed about them, and certainly no interest whatsoever in regaining that career. A boxoffice phenomenon in her day, she has never - fortunately - become a "cult" figure. But her own charm, and the relaxed and appealing qualities of her best (and earlier) films stand the test of time extremely well, their innocence invigorating rather than naive.

... William K. Everson --

A REMINDER not to confuse next week's two films with the American movies of the same title. "THEY DRIVE BY NIGHT" was never released in the U.S., either theatrically or for television, and is now never likely to be since no negative or even good 35mm printing material exists. It is a strange mixture of Fritz Lang and James Whale, directed to an extremely promising film-maker Arthur Woods who died shortly thereafter. Elyn Williams and Ernest Thesiger star. It is difficult to know why "SEVEN SINNERS" is so called since the title seems to bear no relationship to the contents, but it is a thoroughly enjoyable comedy-thriller in the Hitchcock vein, written by Lauder and Gilliatt, and directed by Albert de Courville. A story of train wreckers and murder, it was released in the U.S. in 1937, but hasn't been seen here since its original release. Edmund Lowe and Constance Cummings star.