Two Expert (but unknown) British Thrillers

"THEY DRIVE BY NIGHT" (Warner Brothers-British, 1938) Directed by Arthur Woods; screenplay by Paul Gangelin, James Curtis and Derek Twist from the novel by James Curtis; Musical Director, Ben Lewis; 80 minutes. With Emlyn Williams (Shorty), Anna Konstam (Holly) Ernest Theasger (Hoover), Allen Jeayes (Wally), Ronald Shiner (Charlie), Anthony Holles (Murray), Billy Hartnell (Bus Conductor) and Jennie Hartley, Kitty de Legh, Joe Cunningham, Yolande Terrell, Julie Barrie.

One of the best of a large number of inexpensive but efficient British films that Warners made in the 30's, "They Drive By Night" received good but unremarkable reviews, and was the second-feature to their own Hollywood-made "Heart of the North" on a major British circuit. Youngsters coming along happily for the Technicolor Dick Foran actioner had the daylight scared out of them by the chilling final moments of the unheralded little British thriller! Warners, in Hollywood, who imported only a few of their British productions, appropriated the title and the truck-driving theme of part of the story, used it for their own Raoul Walsh-Humphrey Bogart film, and promptly forgot the original. (In Britain, the Bogart film was re-christened "The Road to Frisco".) Never revived in England, attention called to it only recently by an occasional National Film Theatre showing there, it now seems doomed to remain an obscurity since neither a 35mm negative nor even good 35mm positive printing material remains. This is doubly sad since it is also one of the best films of a likewise obscure British director Arthur Woods. He learned his trade via expert "B" movies in the thirties, and was just establishing himself in his real niche - really tight thrillers - when he was killed. "The Nursemaid Who Disappeared" was another fine Woods film from this period, and his last film was his biggest and one of his most successful "Busman's Honeymoon", actually a Sayres thriller with Robert Montgomery. "They Drive By Night" curiously divides itself into two halves. The first is grim, bitter, realistic, done largely on location, and with a feeling akin to the contemporary Fritz Lang and the later Jules Dassin. Then, mid-way, it casually reveals its murderer and switches moods entirely, becoming a flamboyant (though never tongue-in-cheek) "chiller" in the tradition of "The Old Dark House", with Ernest Theasger turning in a positive anathema of a performance as a witty if potty sex killer, whose self-admiration is never quite comical enough to minimise his real menace. It's an incredible performance for those generally serious days, and as all the more effective then since Theasger's James Whale performances had not been seen in recent years, and he was a relatively unfamiliar movie face. Undoubtedly the movie loses a great deal of subtlety as it changes horses in mid-stream, but it gains so much in Grand Guignol melodrama that one can hardly complain. Incidentally, the fight in the earlier part of the film is unusually well done, in action and in such essential trimmings as realistic sound effects quite matching Hollywood standards, and far surpassing the generally weak and unconvincing scuffles that had to pass for fights in too many films of the period.


Unseen since its original release, "Seven Simmies" (by no mathematical shufflings of the cast can that title be made to have anything to do with the story!) is a bright, fast-moving, witty, often actionful and always civilised comedy-thriller. It's one of many spy/mystery thrillers that Gaumont-British made in the 30's to cash in on the popularity of the Alfred Hitchcock thrillers, but without trying to do more than create the same mood of fun and menace. Unfairly, "Seven Simmies" - though well-reviewed - was accused of copying Hitchcock's "The 39 Steps" as it was already a remake (somewhat changed, and much more sophisticated) of a 1929 British film called "The Wrecker", and it even re-used the same exciting and genuine train wreck footage. Far from being imitation Hitchcock, Launder and Gilliat's lively and funny script in many ways anticipates the writing they did for him in 1938 in "The Lady Vanishes". The story is well-knit and really mysterious, and the lines often very funny in a gentle British way. The cast is first-rate too, with Hollywood's Lowe and Cummings making an inside-out Nick-endo-Nora, the offshoot. Allen Jeayes, the truck-driver in "They Drive By Night" has been one of the least taxing roles of his career, merely being turned over a couple of times as a corpse despite a fairly high position in the cast. The film is almost certainly the best of director Albert de Courville's long, colorful but not really distinguished career, which we'll cover briefly in the pre-screening introduction. --WKE--