BUREAU OF MISSING PERSONS (First National, 1933) Director: Roy Del Ruth
Screenplay by Robert Presnell from an original story by Capt. John H. Ayres and Carol Bird; Camera, Earney McGill; 79 minutes


Although hardly an outstanding film in itself, "Bureau of Missing Persons" was ahead of its time (and a forerunner of such American and British films as "Gideon's Day", "The Naked City" and "The Blue Lamp") in trying to create a composite picture of detective methods, with a number of unrelated cases developed in parallel narrative. Directed by Roy Del Ruth, it has the same crackling pace as his earlier "Blessed Event" and later "Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back". Potentially grisly material is made genuinely funny by tasteful handling and an underplayed cold-blooded delivery. It's surprising how funny (depending of course on one's taste for black comedy) discussions about stitched-together corpses, or a murdered man having been ground up for fertilizer, can be when delivered by experts like Allen Jenkins, and punctuated by that inevitable pre-Code question: "Have you been smoking hop?".

Fast-talking Pat O'Brien (as the detective who prefers strong-arm methods) and dignified Lewis Stone (borrowed from MGM as his more ethical superior) make a good team, and the fast-paced story is carried by such devices as the heroes prancing the iris-cut, and the habit of starting scenes without establishing shots cutting right into an opening door so that the film is in constant motion. While the cases that it covers (taken from a book by a retired police chief) have a reasonable look of authenticity, one hopes that the detecting methods employed use a certain amount of dramatic license. Stumped because kidnappers have a secure hideout and can only be communicated with by carrier pigeon, a detective is reassured: "Just have a fast plane standing by, and when that pigeon takes off, you follow it . . . ."

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

HANDS ACROSS THE TABLE (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Mitchell Leisen
Produced by E. Lloyd Sheldon; screenplay by Norman Krasna, Vincent Lawrence and Herbert Fields from a story by Vina Delmar; music and lyrics by Sam Coslow and Frederick Hollander; Camera, Ted Tetzlaff; 80 minutes


It's not easy to forget a career of overall disappointment and missed potential when approaching a Mitchell Leisen-directed film; one can't ignore the total lack of style in his "Death Takes a Holiday", and his "Easy Living" and "Midnight" seemed to draw everything from their plots and casts, and apparently nothing from his direction. All one can usually remember about his films is the chi-chi production art direction and the predominance of white marble pillars, not surprisingly perhaps in that his first love was art direction, and he served in that capacity under delilie for many years. But while one is tempted to give a lot of the credit for "Hands Across the Table" to writer (and later director) Norman Krasna (somewhat justifiably perhaps, since it is so much resembles later wacky Krasna romantic comedies like "The Big Hangover", an enjoyable Elizabeth Taylor vehicle), at the same time it gives so much over-all satisfaction in its light-weight comedic charm that one certainly can't, and shouldn't shut it. Leisen out. This time he really seems to have pulled it off, and it is a consistently enjoyable little. It is a delightfully and literally appropriate one (the heroine is a manouirist!) and the whole film is a typical Cinderella romance of the mid-depression years, obviously not taking itself too seriously and content to be a light-hearted cinematic escape from non-cinematic problems. The rich are all fairly pleasant, their lack of concern for money conveyed by such lines as "It'll be terrible for my camel trip to the pyramids! Poor Ralph Bellamy - the eternal other man in romantic comedies of the 30's - is once more cast true to form, but even that is a curious kind of plus now, tipping us off right away what the outcome is going to be, so that we can immediately forget the plot and just enjoy the engaging ton-foolery and the pleasant performers. It's a distant cousin to "Holiday", but by no means a poor relation.

-- William A. Everson --

Next week: June 19: First showing in many years of Victor Saville's 1923 British success I WAS A SPY with Madeleine Carroll, Conrad Veidt and Herbert Marshall; and THE MAN WHO PLAYED GOD (1932), one of the best George Arliss vehicles, with Bette Davis, Donald Cook, Guy Milland.