Robert Florey was possibly Hollywood's finest craftsman among "B" movie directors. Given a decent budget, he turned out some fine "B" films too, but his real genius lay in marshalling all the resources available under the old studio system (contract players, cheap cameramen, standing sets) and making $50,000 pictures look as though they cost ten times that much. Not only were they good to look at, but they showed imagination and a genuine love of movies - and often, as here, a respect for the movies past as well. As a mystery, "The Preview Murder Mystery" perhaps doesn't always play fair and is sometimes a bit promiscuous in the way it uses low key lighting and cunning editing to cast suspicion on all and sundry, but this hardly seems a criticism since all too few movie mysteries really play fair. This one however is more interesting in the way that it makes absolutely maximum use of the studio itself as a background. So many Hollywood-located mysteries - an earlier Paramount, "The Studio Murder Mystery" for example - cash in on the background only nominally and really fail to exploit it. Here Florey uses every aspect of studio activity as a backdrop to his story, and in so doing also provides a much more accurate picture of how a studio operates and films are made than many a much bigger production ("The Bad and the Beautiful" for example) which often take the easy way out by showing the romanticised image that audiences expect. On top of his lively story, Florey also manages to pay tribute to the silent screen, uses a number of veteran silent players, and gets off private little jokes at the expense of "The Devil is a Woman" and Calligraphy horror films. Karl Struss, one of the cameramen on "Sunrise", James Smith (D.W. Griffith's former editor) and other technicians are all top-notch, and the cast is first-rate. All in all, the film is a tribute both to Florey's skill, and to the really solid craftsmanship that used to go into even the lowly "B" pictures. Frankly this series of melodrama was - in part at least - set up so that these "little" films that we've wanted to show (or have been asked to show) could logically find their way into a related group of films.

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10 minute intermission
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"AFTER THE THIN MAN" (1936) Directed by W.S. Van Dyke; Produced by Hunt Stromberg; Screenplay by Francis Goodrich and Albert Hackett based on characters created by Dashiell Hammett; Musical Score, Herbert Stothart and Edward Ward; Music and lyrics, Arthur Freed, Nacio Herb Brown; Camera, Oliver Hersh; Editor, Robert Kern; 110 minutes. With William Powell, Myrna Loy, Elissa Landi, Louise Coggins, John Halliday, Elsie Ferguson, Edward Brophy, George Meeker, Jack Radcliffe. Based on the best selling novel by Ferenc Molnar. The features are: "The Thin Man" "The Thin Man Goes Home" "After the Thin Man" "Speedy" "They Had to See Paris" "The Regeneration of Homer Pomable" "The Thin Man in Africa" "The Thin Man in Cuba" "The Thin Man in Manhattan" "The Thin Man Goes to Town" "The Thin Man Comes Back" "Captain January" "The Thin Man Flies Again" "The Thin Man and the Big Money" "The Thin Man's Alibi" "The Thin Man in Hollywood" "The Thin Man in Paris". W.S. Van Dyke (a director represented in earlier series by "Manhattan Melodrama", " Eskimo" and "White Shadows in the South Seas") was the "A" film what Florey was to the "B" - creative, dynamic, thoroughly professional, bringing his films in ahead of schedule, under budget, with no cuts and no cut off assured profits. His original "The Thin Man" was a trifle over-rated today, perhaps a bit too Stephen Leacockish in comedy-thrillers, and is still a pretty enjoyable and undated film, but perhaps misses "classic" stature. The later Thin Man films, still slick and entertaining, tended to be cut to a very standardised pattern. This second one however - apart from having the flaw common to most immediate sequels of trying to outdo the original by being bigger and longer - has somehow been ignored, which is a pity since it is probably the most entertaining entry in the whole series. The first third is virtually straight wacky comedy, and only the mystery mystery and its slightly predictable head. Armed with a knowledge of Hollywood's reliance on casting gimp licks and an under-estimation of audience intelligence, it's only too easy to guess the "mystery" villain's identity right away! The only real surprise is why he/she should suddenly turn from a civilized human being into a raging, snarling, low-key-lit maniac at the moment of denunciation by Mr. Charles. These amiable "muders in the family" mysteries also rather neatly sidestep the moral dilemma of how one feels about proving a life-long friend guilty of murder, and sending him/her to the electric chair!

--- William K. Everson ---