MIRACLES FOR SALE (1938) Directed by Ted Browning; Screenplay by Harry Ruskin, Vernon Parismet and James Edward Grant from the novel "Death From A Top Hat" by Clayton Rawson; Camera, Charles Leaton; 7 reels

Detective-story authorities and aficionados who regard "Death From A Top Hat" as a classic of the "locked room" school of mysteries have always felt, not without some justification, that this film version in changing and simplifying the original itself committed something of a literary and filmic crime. Be that as it may, the original story could write about a plot gimmick that the camera just cannot show without giving at least some of the game away -- especially in view of the rather mannered actor involved in the visual deception. However, suspect that most of us are here tonight to cross off another elusive Tod Browning film. While it has Browning elements -- including an obvious but still effective trick opening -- on the whole it is one of his more conventional works. It has less brooding mysticism that one would have expected him to extract from such a theme, but on the other hand it has a slickness and a staccato pace that is quite a refreshing change from his many rather turgid and deliberately measured films of earlier years. The plot is too involved for lost-minute explanations to tie up all the loose ends, and it cheats quite a bit, leaving off complicated Hollywood special effects as magicians' stage illusions. While it is not Browning's best, it is also at great pains to exclude it from the final solution. However, it is fast, glossy, well-cast and played, and certainly mysterious enough for anyone. While it's not likely to enhance Browning's reputation, it won't detract from it either, and is certainly a better production than would have been turned in by the majority of 101's mystery-specialist contractees. Curiously -- or ironically -- this film, Browning's last, was being played on TV in Hollywood the very day that Browning died, and not a single columnist or TV critic seemed to be aware of it, since the coincidence was passed without comment.

--- Intermission ---

TRouble for Two (1936) Directed by J. Walter Ruben; produced by Louis D. Lighton; Screenplay by Samuel Sclaf and Edward E. Parancore Jr. from "The Suicide Club" by Robert Louis Stevenson; Camera, Charles Clarke; Nyaus, Franz Waxman; Art Direction, Cedric Gibbons; 7 reels

Although released in Europe as "The Suicide Club", there seems to have been almost a conspiracy in this country to conceal the film's identity. Since Robert Montgomery enjoyed his major boxoffice popularity in Eight O'Clock Trend, the title was changed in the US to give it the prestige of one more of the masterpieces that Waxman's score from the beginning -- light, frothy -- seems to be trying to persuade us that it is a comedy. But as soon as Reginald Owen, grotesquely made up, enters as one of the nastiest villains since his own degenerating heavy in "The Call of the Wild" the year before, 'xman realises it is a hopeless cause, and switches to a musical mood more fitting the Gothic style of the film. The bizarre Stevenson tale has been tackled but little by the movies; there was a British silent in 1913, the story (along with some Fee) was included in a stodgy German somnambus thriller of the same year, and more recently there was a tv version. Not least due to the lack of competition, this 1936 film -- its slight original plot expanded almost as imaginatively as that of Hemingway's "The Killers" -- is certainly the definitive screen version to date. It's a wonderful example of a narrative style that has vanished from movies today -- direct, full of surprises, witty and thrilling in turn, and with a beginning, middle and end -- in that order. Its striking compositions and camerawork, and first-rate dialogue delivery, indicate such basic good taste that it is surprising to find that the director is the rather nondescript J. Walter Ruben, who made some deadly dull films away from 101, but who did, admittedly, by virtue of those budgets, team-work and possibly talents of his own that were given greater opportunities with those advantages, turn out a string of workmanlike and enjoyable films for 101 through the late 30's and early 40's. Quite incidentally, original cast-lists (not the credits of the movie itself) give the names of Virginia Weidler and David Holt, suggesting that there was a prologue (or flashback) in which the two lead actors seen as children, something now only referred to in dialogue. The film, virtually unknown, is not a rediscovered classic, but it is certainly a rediscovered delight.

--- William K. Everson ---