Definitions of film noir - its characteristics, its period, whether it is a genre or a style - differ a great deal, and is something better taken up in our screening introduction. Suffice to say here that there is no question but that film noir peaked in 1947; both in Hollywood and Britain, more noir films were concentrated into that one year than into any other; and correspondingly, the production of comedies that year, especially in Britain, was singularly low. In 1948, things took a more optimistic swing, and film noir began to dominate the screen a rather less - though the later noir films tended to be among the best, since the stylitics had been refined, and what had once seemed cliches was now becoming tradition. Tonight's two films are rather unusual examples of the species. In All This Time, in the big city/crime category into which most noir films fell, but quite definitely belonging to the group as a whole. Equally certainly, both films would have been handled very differently had they been made at a different period of film history.

THE BROTHERS (Sydney Box-General Film Distributors, 1947) Directed by David MacDonald; produced by Sydney Box; Screenplay by Mariel and Sydney Box from an adaptation by David MacDonald, L.A.G. Strong and Paul Vincent Carroll from the novel by L.A.G. Strong; Camera, Stephen Dade; exterior camera work, Peter Hennessey, Bert Mason; Art Director, George Provis; Music composed by Cedric Thorpe Davie and played by the London Symphony Orchestra; 85 mins.

With Patricia Roc (Mary); Will Pyffe (Aeneas McGrath); Maxwell Reed (Fergus Macrae); Finlay Currie (Hector Macrae); Dala Macrae (John Macrae); John Laurie (Dugald); Andrew Crawford (Willie MacFarish); Hamish Wiseman (Friest); Morland Graham (Angus McFarish); Megs Jenkins (Angusina); Patrick Bollill (The Informer); Donald McAllister (George McFarish); David Keir (Postman); Jack Lambert (police officer); U.S. version only.

L.A.G. Strong's romantic and dramatic novels about rural England had provided material for a number of British movies, but "The Brothers" had not been made until this 1947 version, while I don't offer this as a fact, it seems highly likely that someone in the Rank organisation saw its coincidental parallels to "Duel in the Sun", released the year before. Because of the prevailing noir fashions in film, it was a good time to make such a basically grim film, and it also had possibilities as a vehicle for Patricia Roc, one of the foremost of the newer Rank stars.

It's interesting that the original British press and publicity book for the film likens it to "Greek tragedy" and refers to "...the atmosphere of impending doom as the characters walk their ways, almost like puppets, to their inevitable end - the kind of phraseology that one finds a great deal of in the year's later film writing about the film noir style. Although most film noirs take place at night, and a good deal of "The Brothers" is enacted in daylight, it is a grim, misty, cheerless daylight."

"The Brothers" is a film I have wanted to include in these series ever since they began some 15 years ago, and I have held off only because of the unavailability of a British print, the American version having been changed and subjected to censorship. Alas, no British print has ever presented itself as being available on 16mm., and even on an institute like the Museum of Modern Art would have the clout to get a 35mm. print from England, there have been no series as yet where it could do so. So, rather than wait for an indefinite period, here is the U.S. version. It must be admitted, and this is not just a rationalisation, that the changes, academically interesting in themselves, do not seem as harmful now as they did originally. Standards over here have changed so much that the changed scenes, which would have seemed very strong in 1947, by the standards of 1980 would seem quite tame. And the film is so good on other levels that it's a pity to withold it. There are three specific changes worth noting, and knowing of them, you can perhaps "read" the film in its original form. Missing is a seduction scene on the beach - still decorous, by 1947 standards however fairly erotic, even though achieved by the customary cutaways to pounding waves and outstretched hands. The scene now finishes with a rather accelerated embrace, the most important change in the transition of the original tragic ending to a happy one for the U.S. market. Patricia Roc is so much better known over here in the British version, but here turns up beaming happily (and without explanation) adrift in a ship's cliffs. This renders somewhat pointless the lovely little legend that Will Pyffe tells during the course of the film, and which is intended to parallel and prevent the Roe/Reed love story. The other change is dictated by the Production Code: the ending of the film, where the fishermen take the law into their own hands. A scene has been added at the end in which John Laurie, as spokesman for the fishermen, expresses collective guilt in the man's death. In the original film, Duncan Macrae, the villain, has engineered the heroine's death by his Iago-like machinations, and he is executed in the same way, with no sign of repentance or guilt on the part of the fishermen. Here it is merely implied that he will share in whatever legal punishment is meted out for the first killing. Most of the damage is thus done. -over-
in the last five minutes of the film, too late to do much harm to the brooding power of the film proper, but certainly able to shortchange and minimise the punch of the ending.

It remains however a very interesting and still not very well known film, probably the best of director David MacDonald's career. He started as an anonymous director to Cecil B. de Mille in Hollywood in the early 30's, made resourceful little quota quickies in Britain in the mid-30's, and really hit his stride with a film called "This Man in News" (which we showed some seasons back) which was a snappy thriller in the "Thin Man" tradition. He worked especially well with the star of that film, Barry K. Barnes, on a number of slick melodramas, one of which "Spies of the Air" we'll be showing next year. During the war, MacDonald worked primarily on documentaries, and his much-more ambitious post-war films, such as this one and "Cairo Road", benefitted from a great of documentary input. It must be admitted however, that he never became the major director that we once thought he would, and many of his later films are both disappointing and routine, though he can hardly be blamed for the scripts he was given. It's hard to reconcile the talent of "This Man is News" and "The Brothers" with a mid-30's film like "Devil Girl from Mars!"

The matching up of location work with studio sets is ingenious, but often rather obvious, though the prevailing blackness of image gives it all a certain ascension. Patriarchal beauty and Will Pfyffe offers his usual whimsical charm; otherwise the players (even the sympathetic and supposedly likeable ones) are a surly lot, and Maxwell Reed and Andrew Crawford were not among the more inspiring British discoveries of the period. Duncan MacKie, the film's villain, was however an excellent actor and too little used by British film. He was far more interested in music, and frequently toured this country with an orchestra and group of Scottish singers.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

THE LOCKET (Rko Radio 1946, rel: 1947) Directed by John Brahm; produced by Bert Granet; Screenplay, Sheridan Gibney; Camera, Nick Musuraca; Music, Roy Webb; 86 mins.

With Laraine Day, Brian Ahern, Robert Mitchum, Gene Raymond, Ricardo Cortez, Sharryn Moffat, Henry Stephenson, Katherine Emery, Reginald Denny, Helene Thimig, Fay Helm, Queenie Leonard, Myrna Dell, Nella Walker, Johnny Clark.

When it was released, "The Locket" was not only lost in the shuffle, but roundly criticised for its excess. There had been so many noir films, so many murky psychological thrillers, so many narratives told in flashback, that this seemed too much of a good thing. Few people had the insight or the perspective to realise that it was literally a "definitive" film noir, and of course that whole school of film-making was not then fully understood or studied on a serious level. Today it can be seen to have a definitive noir director (John Brahm, one of the foremost German directors then working in Hollywood), cameraman (Musuraca) and victim/hero in Robert Mitchum. Even the form was classical: little sunlight, a fragmented screen full of distortions, shadows and hints of German expressionism, a first-person narration, foretelling doom from the beginning, and most of all the ultimate in flashback devices - flashbacks within flashbacks within flashbacks, so that we never really know where we are, but have the sense of time, memories and foreboding crowding us from every quarter.

Though still not nearly as well known as it should be, "The Locket" is slowly gaining in reputation, and has already been treated to some near Freudian filmic psycho-analyses which are fascinating but fortunately too long and detailed to outline in the little space left to us. In any event, it's such a fascinating film that it's best to approach it relatively cold, and I will limit my comments to calling attention to the visual style of the flashbacks themselves, each of them quite different and reflecting the point of view of the teller of that particular segment, this even extending to a child's eye-level view when she is telling the story.

In only one area does the film fall down a little. The London sequences are decidedly sketchy and unconvincing (in detail that is), and the idea of a "plotting" the film together "Doomsday-DM" (and distorting it horribly in the process) to an enthusiastic aristocratic audience, is just beyond the pale. They would rather have gone down to defeat at the hands of the enemy than tolerate such a cultural affront or invasion of their privacy.

William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10.40