Dear Murderer (Gainsborough, 1946; U.S. release by Universal, 1948) Directed by Arthur Crabtree
Produced by Betty and Sydney Box; Screenplay by Murray & Sidney Box from the play by St. John Leigh Clough; Camera, Stephen Dade; Music: Muir Mathieson; 90 mins.

"Dear Murderer" started off life fairly unambitiously in a small theatre in Walton Green, South West London, that had been specialising in groups of short Grand Guignol plays with Ted Laughter. It was an immediate hit, moved to the West End for a more production, and was made into this movie soon afterwards. Its writer, St. John Leigh Clough (pronounced "Clues") wanted more than anything else to be a movie director. He did direct one film, the financially successful (but poorly directed) "We Orchide for Miss Blandish", and then died while still a young man.

"Dear Murderer" is perhaps the first of the deliberately complex, gimmicky "perfect crime" plays, still a relatively small group that includes "Dial M for Murder" and "Glen". It's the kind of detective play that the British like; polite, sedate, often witty, and so far removed from reality that one never gets involved emotionally to be upset when interesting characters are killed off. Unlike most British plays of this type however, it gets off to a running start, swinging into action in the first act with the murder taking place on stage. The screen version has soft-pedalled this a little; the play had more dialogue between murderer and victim-to-be, as the latter tried to point out loopholes in the plan while the killer explained them away; also the play was a little more glibly explicit with the head-in-the-gas oven business. Otherwise however, the film remains remarkably faithful to its source, opening like a play, having even more plot, and sticking to characters and dialogue with an attempt at "openness". Even the New York sequence is really only an extension of the scene of voice-over dialogue. Some curious errors creep in here however: a New York office is open on February 22, and the chances of Eric Portman finding a copy of "The Tatler" (a chic London society magazine) lying about in a Times Square bar are about as likely as "The National Enquirer" winding up in Buckingham Palace. An interesting note of progress: Portman spends an entire weekend waiting for a call to London to come through, a normal procedure in 1946, whereas now one can dial direct in a matter of seconds. It's a talkative film and makes no bones about its plot origins, and is fascinating rather than suspenseful; but the talk is good and the players are first-rate, so it all adds up to an entertaining diversion.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

Green for Danger (Rank/Individual, 1946; released in the US by Eagle-Lion in 1948)
Produced by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat; Directed by Sidney Gilliat; Screenplay by Gilliat and Claude Gwerny from the novel by Christiana Brand; Camera, Willie Cooper and Oswald Morris; Music, William Alwyn; 85 mins.
With Alastair Sim, Trevor Howard, Sally Gray, Leo Genn, Rosamund John, Mews Jenkins, Judy Campbell, Moore Marriott, Harry Edwards, Ronald Adam, George Woodbridge, Frank Ling.

"Green for Danger" was one of those few British films of the 40's that seemed finally to have captured the American market. It opened to rave reviews and good business at the Winter Garden in New York, with alternate ad campaigns suggesting all sorts of curious things. Yet it wasn't too long before it had been forgotten and was playing the 42nd St. grind houses under the title "The Mad Killer", doubled with "Gang War" (which turned out to be "Odd Man Out")! It was also rather curiously forgotten in England until a few years ago, where now, happily, it has renewed exposure and popularity. And recently it was on TV so much that I hope we still have an audience for it tonight, and it needs the concentration and uninterrupted flow that TV can't provide.

"Green for Danger" is very much of a classic of its kind, ranking with "The Kennel Murder Case" and "The Maltese Falcon" as a model transition from printed page to screen, the perfect translation of a civilised and comfortable mystery novel into an equally civilised (though far from comfortable) mystery movie. As one has now come to expect from writer-director Gilliat it is witty, light-hearted but unpredictable, the moments of terror (and even horror) all the more effective because of their lack of build-up. The novel itself was a beauty, but Gilliat updates and polishes it in so many little and essentially silly filler scenes, (alas Alastair Sim's pantomime as he looks to the back of a mystery novel, confident that he has spotted the killer, or the use of the V-1 bombs both as a running gag, and to increase the sense of tension and the unexpected. (The novel was set in the blitz proper, a period of the war rather dated by 1946). Sim so completely wraps up the film with his off-beat detective that everybody expected Rank to launch him in a series of Inspector Cokrill follow-ups, something that was fortunately not allowed to happen so that the character, and the original novel, did not become cheapened as is so often the case. But regardless of all the adroit mixture of comedy and thrill, and the smoothness of all the playing (apart from Sim, Ronald Adam, Harry Edwards, and particularly good are the lad who makes "Green for Danger" so unique among its species is its restraint and honesty. It plays fairly with the audience at all times, never cheats, keeps red herrings to a minimum, points the accusing finger at all (and even when actually tells you who the killer is - if you're wide awake). It never once tries to lead the audience up the garden path by the false clues and manipulation of audience familiarity with who-done-it? rules that made guessing the identity of the killer such child's play in most mysteries of the 30's and 40's.

Program Ends approx. 10:35.

William K. Everson