An evening of stylish mysteries

THE HIDDEN EYE (MGM, 1945) Directed by Richard Whorf; Produced by Robert Sisk; Screenplay by George Harmon Coye and Harry Ruskin from a story by Coye; Musical Score, David Snell; Camera, Lester White; 69 mins.


MGM made some good little "B" mysteries in the 30's and 40's, though actually, so conscious was MGM of its image, that even its Bs were so glossy that they were good enough to play as "A"s in many situations. While they didn't have the zip and speed of similar films from Paramount or Warners, they often made up for that with production values, originality, and the entrusting of the subjects to interesting new directors, often promoted from shorts, like Jacques Tourneur and Fred Zimmerman. "The Hidden Eye" was the second of two neat little films starring Edward Arnold as a blind detective (the first was "Eye in the Night"). There's a limit to the extent to which such a character can be used, and MGM seemed to realize that; while good, this film doesn't have the novelty or impact of the first one, and there was no third.

In some ways, Arnold's role is a far more cheerful extension of his Nero Wolfe characterization some ten years earlier, with William Phillips filling the role played by Lionel Stander in that earlier film. The identity of the killer is painfully obvious even before the crime is committed - even from reading the cast-list one might add - and seemingly aware of that, MGM stops making a game of it fairly early in the proceedings and comes right out with the revelation. But the novelty of the situation and the interesting cast - with an unblurred Audrey Totter doing her damnest (as a perfume saleslady) to make the same kind of instant impression that Lana Turner made in "They Won't Forget" - is mf.. If it is only with the casual conversational camaraderie that Edward Arnold has with his seeing eye dog, the canine having such a command of the English language that one almost expects him to solve the crime!

** Ten Minute Intermission **

THE OCTOBER MAN (Rank-General Film Distributors, 1947) Directed by Roy Baker; Produced by Eric Ambler; screenplay by Ambler from his own original story; Camera, Erwin Hillier; Music, William Alwyn; 105 mins.

With John Mills (Jim Ackland) Joan Greenwood (Jenny Carden); Edward Chapman (Mr. Peachey); Joyce Carey (Mrs. Vinton); Kay Walsh (Kolly Newman); Adrienne Allen (Mrs. Carden); Catherin Lacey (Miss Selby); Frederick Piper (Godby); Felix Aylmer (Dr. Martin); Patrick Holt (Harry); George Benson (Mr. Pope); Jack Nelford (Wilcox); John Boxer (Trout); Juliet Mills (little girl on bus); Edward Underwood (Constable official); John Sawai (ticket collector); James Hayter (Taxi driver) and Sidney James, Eam Baring, Phillip Ray, John Miller, Jack Raine.

Note: film was released in the U.S. by Eagle-Lion edited down to 90 mins, and was also reissued in Britain in an 83 minute version. The print tonight is of the full original version.

When "The October Man" was initially released it England, it was badly under-rated in one way, over-rated in others. It got a great deal of attention from critics because it was the first film of an obviously talented new director, Roy Baker (and it remains one of his best films) who seemed then (and has since proven to be) a director very much in the Hitchcock/Lang tradition. It was also regarded as a front-rank mystery-thriller, which is a little harder to accept, since the identity of the killer (once one is past the initial stages of wondering if it might be John Mills) is perfectly obvious, especially to those familiar with British type-casting and the inhabitants of seedy British hotels.

"The October Man" is first and foremost a film-noir, an essay in style and mood, and since it was released at the height of the film noir period (1947 was in fact its peak, with nearly 100 noir films released) and was a thematic brother to such current films as "Spellbound", "Somewhere in the Night" and "The Locket", one wonders why it wasn't treated as such by the critics. (Admittedly, without the perspective that we now have, film noir wasn't discussed as such then, but even so "The October Man" was always more interesting for style than story). So much of it adheres almost rigidly (though of course accidentally) to what we now consider "rules" of film noir: a "loser" hero who may be a psycho; a story that takes place almost entirely at night; street sets that are often stylised rather than completely realistic; a "good" woman and a "bad" one who is destructive, although in this case she is more tragic than "bad", and many individual shots and compositions, starting off at the very beginning with that traditional noir shot, the subjective shot through the windshield of a vehicle careening through the rainy night to some doomed, sinister destination: Incidentally, the little child with John Mills in these opening scenes is daughter, Julian, who has since grown up rather nicely, as witness her performance (and made scenes!) in Billy Wilder's "Avanti!"

If you overlook the rather obvious miniature trains (how the British studios loved them!) this is a sober, polished production with some extremely good acting that deserves renewed attention, though not for its qualities as a mystery.

-- WAI K. EVERTSON

Program Ends approx. 10:30

Fall schedule programs will be available next week, and include the long-awaited and long unavailable "It's a Date" with Deanna Durbin and Kay Francis.

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Apparently Miss Totter made a sufficiently dynamic impression to divert me from completing that sentence! But the point is made, even if the grammar is awry.