Two light-hearted crime films from the 30's.

HILLION DOLLAR SCANDAL (Paramount, 1932; rel: 1933) Directed by Harry Joe Brown; story and screenplay by Gene Towne and Graham Baker, with dialogue by Willard Mack and Beatrice Cornell; George Raft, Charles Starrett, 80 mins.

"Hillion Dollar Scandal!" is so loose a reworking of an old play "The Best People", filmed by Paramount in 1925, that there is no acknowledgement of it in the credits. Basically all that has been retained are one or two characters and the element of social differences; the original certainly had no crime elements at all. It's rather difficult to know whether this was a potentially important film in the "Five Star Final" tradition that somehow went away, or an ambitious programmer that pulled itself together and made something of itself. In all probability the latter was the case, judging from the cast and the relative unimportance of the director. It is an inconsistent film that starts out in bantering, Damon Runyon fashion, this approach not quite working because Armstrong's comic tough guy doesn't really ring true. Then, for a while it shifts gears, seeming to join the then-popular gangster and newspaper cycle. Finally, in its last third, it makes it. From the trial on through the sudden, underplayed and ironic ending, it is suspenseful and often poignant. This last third is good enough to make one feel generous towards the rest of it. With a Cagney, O'Brien or Lee Tracy in the lead, it might have worked better; with some director other than Harry Joe Brown (expert at westerns, ill at ease in other areas) it might have seemed less confused. But with all of its shortcomings, it is still interesting, entertaining and unpredictable. That fine actor Frank Morgan gets another chance to show how touching he could be when given the chance, and it's always a pleasure to watch the cool elegance of Constance Cummings. Edward van Sloan, just through with his attempts to destroy the Frankenstein monster, Dracula and the Munkey, plays so delightfully in the same vein that one almost expects him to draw a crucifix from his pocket to ward off Robert Armstrong! His political/oil manipulation background was particularly topical in 1933, but in that respect the film doesn't really date, and one suspects that exactly the same kind of wheeling and dealing is going on in Washington today. Incidentally, we're sorry we can't duplicate the stage show that went with the film's original New York opening -- Billie Baro and George Jessell lamponing Garbo and Barrymore in "Grand Hotel."

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

STOLEN HARMONY (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Alfred Werker; produced by Albert Lewis; screenplay by Leon Gordon, Harry Ruskin, Claude Rains and Lewis Foster from a story by Leon Gordon; Music, Harry Revel and Mack Gordon; dances, LeRoy Prinz; camer, Harry Pischbeck; 76 mins.

"Stolen Harmony" is one of those enjoyable programmers that succeeds because of rather than in spite of its many cliches, and yet at the same time changes mood and pace so often that it is never really predictable, a quality it shares with its co-feature. It's a musical, a gangster thriller and a regeneration drama all wrapped up in one, and one is never sure which aspect is going to - or is supposed to dominate. Some of Raft's on-cam travails have all the Germanic quality of a Fritz Lang effort, while the sudden, savage gangland climax - in which quite leviable little people like Iris Adrian are casually massacred in a sequence as grim and stylised as the massacre in "Scarface" - provides quite a jolt. It has never been easy to make films that thrive on sudden changes of mood and yet retain an overall consistency. Preston-Sturgess managed it of course, and so did the odd individual film such as "Bennie and Clyde."

"Stolen Harmony" doesn't quite manage it, but it is an interesting example of a curious mid-30's cycle that tried to weld the gangster film to screwball comedy. John Ford's "The Whole Town's Talking" and Ray Enright's "She Couldn't Take It" (also with Raft and Nolan together) were talking and Ray Enright's "She Couldn't Take It" (also with Raft and Nolan together) were

-- William K. Everson --

Program ends approx. 10:24.