An evening of Mystery and Melodrama

THINK FIRST (MGM, 1938) A "Crime Does Not Pay" subject, directed by Ray Rowland
Story by Douglas Foster and Alan Friedman; Camera, Charles Schoenbaun; 20 mins.
With: Laraine Day, Dorothy Morris, Jo Ann Sayers, Marc Lawrence, Sara Haden, Truman Bradley, Anthony Warde, Phil Terry, Ann Shoemaker, Purnell Pratt, James Flavin, Barbara Bedford.

Through their necessity to tell often complex stories both quickly and economically, MGM's "Crime Does Not Pay" series occasionally seems both unobtainable and heavy-handed today. But at the same time, especially since then many other earlier hits told dramatic stories in a more single reel as opposed to the two allotted to this series, so they seemed quite powerful. They still retain their MGM gloss of course, but the added interest of seeing subsequent top-liners (players and directors primarily) on the way up. "Think First" is certainly one of the better ones.

COLLEGE SCANDAL (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Elliot Nugent; produced by Albert Lewis;
Screenplay by Frank Parola, Charles Brackett and Marguerite Roberts from a story by Beulah Marie Dix and Bertram Millhauser; Camera, Theodor Sparkuhl; Music, Sam Coslow; 76 mins.
Note: Remade in 1942 as "Sweater Girl".

Like last week's "The Mad Doctor", "College Scandal" short-changes its merits by a very commonplace and not very informative title. In the mid-30's, and especially from Paramount, college romances and musicals were almost a glut on the market, even the cast of this one suggesting that it is more of the same. (Not that it's not always a pleasure to see Wendy Barrie, Arline Judge, Johnny Downs et al, but one cannot expect a lot from a cast top-lined such names). But the "scandal" turns out to be an initial death and subsequent murders, and the film turns into a really absorbing little mystery. Not only that, it is one of those minor films (others of a like ilk were "Charlie Chan in Egypt" and "Twelve Good Men") that contains either ideas or scenes that are genuinely chilling -- the kind of film that many of us saw as children and were scared by, and spent the rest of our lives trying to track down. We all have one or two such filmic ghosts in our closet where we can't recall the title and nobody seems able to help us! Hopefully we may bring peace to a few tortured souls tonight who may have been wondering about this film ever since 1935. I deliberately don't want to talk about the film's highspots as that would ruin the surprise element, so I'll just say that, once again, it's a welcome reminder of what real quality went into many of the 30's, and especially those at Paramount. Admittedly, it's long enough (and certainly good enough) to transmog its B status, though that is undoubtedly how it played most of the time. Elliot Nugent was quite a prolific director at this time; he made four films in 1935, and he was responsible for some very good 30's thrillers, including of course the Bob Hope "The Cat and the Canary".

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

FORTUNE IS A WOMAN (U.S. TITLE "SHE PLAYED WITH FIRST") (Columbia, 1937) Directed by Sidney Gilliat
A Frank Launder-Sidney Gilliat production for John Harval Productions; Written by Launder and Gilliat (with Val Valentine) from a novel by Winston Graham; Camera, Gerald Gibbs; Music by Harry South; Editor, Ivy Allen; 95 mins.

While this may have gone into 42nd Street as the lower half of a double bill, it certainly never got a New York first-run, was ignored by the critics and is still virtually unknown by the public... surprising in view of the success (here as well as in England) of such earlier Launder/Gilliat thrillers as "Green For Danger" and "State Secret". Gilliat attributes part of the blame to the poor title in England and the worse one for the U.S. When they came up with a good title for it -- "Red Sky at Night" -- it was too late to use it. Launder/Gilliat had owned the property earlier, but had let it go, thinking it too difficult to turn it into something other than a who-dun-it, and also finding it "old-fashioned". It was later returned to them as part of a package at Columbia, and they were pleased with the film, but disappointed with the boxoffice results. "Old-fashioned" sprung up rather well; in 1957 it must have seemed just that, an echo of early Hitchcock and Agatha Christie at a time when thrillers were starting to get more serious ("Time Without Pity", "Tiger Bay", "Orders to Kill") and when the slickness and gimmicks of James Bond were just around the corner. It's still old-fashioned but almost a quarter of a century later, that has become rather a virtue -- it's traditional rather than cliched, a cozy, civilized, non-violent but quite absorbing mystery. And it does have its surprises: one is never sure whether Arlene Dahl is a destructive James Cain femme fatale or not -- and while we know we're being led up the garden path concerning Ian Hunter and that he has to figure in the villainy at the denouement, we can never guess why. (One is reminded of Godfrey Tearle's comment in "The 39 Steps" that he's never sure whether one is led up the garden path or down it -- and Robert Donat's fatalistic reply that whichever it is, he's in the wrong garden!) If not breathlessly exciting, "Fortune is a Woman" is certainly solidly satisfying, and we're glad to give this filmic orphan at least a temporary home on the New School screen.

-- William K. Everson --

Program finishes 11.11.
Due to the quite long program and our later starting time this season, there'll be no time for a discussion session tonight, though as always I'll be available informally, outside, afterwards. Next week's silent program is shorter than tonight's by some four reels, so we'll have time for an official question/answer period then.

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