THE DEVIL IS DRIVING (Paramount, 1932) Directed by Benjamin Stoloff
Screenplay by Louis Weitzenkorn, P.J. Wolfson and Allen Rivkin from a story by Frank Mitchell Daze; Camera, Henry Sharp. 72 min.

While the "prestige" rediscoveries are always welcome, these days it is in the area of the humble programmers that some of the most exhilarating and entertaining -rediscoveries are being made. And the beauty of it is that so many of them were made, and that so many surprises probably still await us. True, programmers were designed to be no more than pleasant time-killers and many of them are just that, and disappointing if one expects more. Another Paramount Lowe/Gibson film of the same period, "Her Bodyguard", with a better director, does disappointment. But the films are out there, and if one can find them and sift through to find the rough diamonds, the results are often delightful and worth waiting for. "The Devil Is Driving" is certainly such a film; it starts out (apparently) as a zippy pre-Code comedy with some really smart dialogue, and then shifts gears to become a tough and gutsy crime melodrama, while still retaining much of the humor. The pace is past, and the characters off-beat especially Alan Dinehart as the far from unlikeable gang boss. And everything builds nicely to a bang-up climax. No little of the credit, surely, belongs to the trio of exceptionally talented scenarists, one of whom, Louis Weitzenkorn, was the author of the play "Five Star Final". Benjamin Stoloff is hardly a director in need of serious reappraisal, but perhaps warrants a nod for the skill with which he handled the material (as well as other varied films from the late silent period through the mid-40's, with such films as Tom Fitch westerns, musicals ("Happy Days", "Transatlantic Merry-go-Round"), "Three Rogues", "Palooka" and "Goldie" among his credits. "The Devil Is Driving" is certainly one of his most sprightly and entertaining movies.

--- Ten Minute Interruption ---

THE SOLITAIRE MAN (MGM, 1933) Directed by Jack Conway
Screenplay by James K. McGuinness, from a play by Bella and Samuel Sposatk; Camera, Roy Overbaugh. 70 min.
With Herbert Marshall, Elizabeth Allan, Lionel Atwill, Mary Boland, Ralph Forbes, Mary Robson, Lucille Gleason, Robert McWade, Harry Holman, Frank Puglia, Lawrence Grant, Jameson Thomas, Emile Chautard, Leyland Hodgson, Charles Irwin, Murray Kinnell.

MGM programmers and "B" movies were a curious group of films, ever-mindful of the studio image, MGM gave them good directors, excellent casts, glossy montages and always started them off on the right foot with fairly big sets and lots of movement. Then having done all that, they invariably failed to exploit the dramatic possibilities of the script, and were quite happy to have the latter portions of the films succumb to economy. "Absolute Quiet" fell into that category a season or so back, and while "The Solitaire Man" is considerably better, it still is all spending of its footage and a plane-interior set that couldn't have been much smaller had it been shot at Monogram!

Although still made before the Production Code dropped with such a heavy thud, it's glossier, more polite and a good deal less vicious than its co-feature. The heroine's willingness to be the hero's mistress rather than his wife wouldn't of course have been countenanced a year or so later, nor certainly would Ralph Forbes' un-named but subtly obvious "habit" - a habit underlined by some quite unpardonable over-acting! The ultra-convenient manipulating of evidence and disposal of unsympathetic characters in order to pave the way for happiness for those that deserve it, is likewise a pre-Code symptom. Otherwise, it remains, like most programmers, a time-killer - but an extremely pleasant and enjoyable one by virtue of its cast. Lionel Atwill arrives on the scene relatively late, but of course Moses no time in making himself thoroughly unpleasant to all concerned!

It is rather strange to find Herbert Marshall starring in a relatively unimportant film only a year after "Blonde Venus" and "Trouble in Paradise", but then he never was as big a star as Colman, and his whole career is marked by odd juxtapositions of "A" and "B" product. Perhaps the real surprise is finding Jack Conway, a major MGM director, knocking this one off between such biggies as "Arsene Lupin" and "Hell Below", and "Viva Villa" and ""A Tale of Two Cities" - but then one of the best ways to remain a major studio director in these days was to make those they were to lose accept all assignments without rocking the boat. Quite apart from its entertainment values, the film is also quite remarkable for its commentary on safety precautions - or lack of them - in plane travel then. Unsupervised by a single stewardess, passengers are free to open doors and windows at will in mid-flight, to walk about while landing, and to barge in and out of the cockpit. Or perhaps it's just that movie audiences were so unfamiliar with plane travel then that MGM didn't consider these details worth worrying about!

--- William K. Everson

PROGRAM ENDS approx. 10.12., followed by discussion session.