We have showed many films directed by Robert Florey in the past, and have written too much about his directorial skills to need repeating here. Suffice to say that he was undoubtedly one of the classiest "B" movie director Hollywood ever had, and here we have three typical "B"s’ side by side, but each from a different studio, and thus representative of the problems and advantages he encountered.

TWO IN A TAXI (Columbia, 1941) Directed by Robert Florey; Screenplay by Howard J. Green, Morton Thompson and Malvin Wald; Camera, George Meehan; 62 mins. With Anita Louise, Russell Hayden, Noah Beery Jr., Dick Purcell, George Cleveland, Chick Chandler, Fay Helm, Frank Yaconelli, Paul Porciello, Ben Taggart, Henry Brandon, John Harley, Ralph Peters, Edmund Cobb, Tom London, James Seay, John Dilsen, Charles Wilson, Terrence Ray, George McKay, Andre Beranger, Dutch Hendriks.

Florey made a few films for Columbia between his Paramount and second (and much upgraded) Warner contracts. While his "Face Behind the Mask" with Lorre is probably the best-known of these, "Two in a Taxi" is one of the most interesting. It's not too much of an exaggeration to say that it is Florey's own "B" equivalent of Vidor's classic "The Crowd." Columbia never allotted much money to their Bs and it shows; nevertheless, Florey manages to start off with a typical montage that sets the stage as being New York, and manages to angle his cameras in the subsequent studio backlot streets and outdoor locations to at least downplay an obvious California milieu, and while Columbia's contract players weren't as interesting as Warners' or Paramount's, he still selects and uses them intelligently. The original script is an unusually good one for a "B," with dialogue that is sensible and workmanlike, yet unpretentious ... no easy task when writing about "ordinary" people and trying to keep them both dramatic and realistic. The story is full of people and incidents all ready to be manipulated into cliches and complications, but Florey sidesteps all the dangers, even downplaying (in terms of excitement) the action of a certain chase sequence since it is burying itself with the melodramatics of the chase itself. There are some interesting casual references to the progress of the war in Europe, but since America was still officially neutral, they are not stressed. Perhaps the only shortcoming is leading-man Russell Hayden, basically a western star. There's nothing wrong with his performance, but he does tend to be rather over-shadowed by all the professionals around him. It's a curious little film, but a rather endearing honest one. Columbia would probably much rather have had the domestic elements downplayed in favor of some fights and other action, but Florey for once uses the moments of action only as punctuation and gets out of them quite quickly. In any case, it's a pleasant and relaxed introduction to the two more dynamic and perhaps more typical Florey "B"s that follow.

--- FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

DAUGHTER OF SHANGHAI (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Robert Florey; Screenplay by Gladys Unger and Charles Reisner; from an original story by Weston; Camera, Paul C. Vogt; 67 mins.


While Paramount "A"s were often lethargic and padded, their "B" melodramas were the best in the business - slick, well-mounted, and with an astonishing variety of themes, although F.B.I. stories tended to dominate. The best of them were done by Florey, who was in his most felicitous element at Paramount. For one thing, he had access to a remarkable talent roster of contract players and top cameramen, including the great Karl Struss. Secondly, Paramount's standing sets - and sets in use for current, bigger pictures - were often lush and exotic, reflecting the tastes and sense of design of the studio's super-director, Fred MacMurray. Often it's not so much that they used and developed them as they happened to, and without having to have them built specially. And finally, Paramount had a very liberal attitude towards their Bs, never insisting that they be confined to a set length. If they were longer than expected, and turned out well, they could often be sold on a higher level, and this frequently happened with the Florey pictures, which ranged in length from 56 minutes to 80. "Daughter of Shanghai" is however a tight little package, one of many good, many good, and the 30 minute ending the inadvisability of being an (illegal) Oriental immigrant. Invariably they wound up being jettisoned from the false bottom of a plane (as here) or thrown overboard, tied to an anchor chain, as in "I Cover the Waterfront." Basically it's standard fare with standard ingredients: the unsuspected "higher-up," the infiltrating of the gang, the last-minute race to the rescue by the police. But Florey dresses it up with increased excitement. "Traveling from Chinatown to a tropical island dive which von Sternberg wouldn't have been ashamed of. Presumably Florey had von Sternberg
in mind much of the time, or he wouldn't have gone to such pains to re-unite 
Evelyn Brent and Fred Kohler (from "Underworld") in a rather arbitrary fashion. 
Incidentally, Philip Arn is nominally the hero, even though contract stars 
(often with far less to do) precede him in billing. It was certainly unusual, 
outside of the Chan and Moto series, to find an Oriental hero in this period. 
And the blank masquerade, despite wielding a razor in one sequence, is a 
definite non-stereotype too. In fact it's rather refreshing (in this particular 
period in Hollywood) to find that all of the good guys are racial minority 
representatives, while all of the villains are white. Incidentally, the English 
release title of the film was "Daughter of the Orient" — presumably because it 
more fairly indicated the "mystery" genre of the film, while the use of the word 
"Shanghai" suggested that it might be a war film, as in the same year's 
"Exiled to Shanghai". Perhaps not quite so good as "King of Alcatraz", 
arguably the best of Florey's 30's, "Daughter of Shanghai" is nevertheless well 
up to the standards set by "King of Gamblers" and "Prevue Murder Mystery". 

— FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION —

I AM A THIEF (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by Robert Florey; Original story 
and screenplay by Ralph Block and Doris Malloy; Camera, Sid Hickox; 64 mins. 
With Ricardo Cortez, Mary Astor, Dudley Digges, Robert Barrat, Irving Pichel, 
Hobart Cawannaugh, Arthur Aylesworth, Ferdinand Gottschalk, Frank Reicher, Oscar 
Apfel, Florence Partir, John Wray, Christian Rub, Perry Ivins, Bill Elliott, Leo 
White, Rolfe Sedan, Gordon DeMain, Paul Panzer.

For purposes of balanced programming and diversification, tonight's show is 
actually being run in reverse chronology. Florey got out of the "30's movie field 
of exactly the time that it was becoming difficult to do them well and cheaply, 
even though he would have fitted in well with Paramount's "30's" unit of the early 
40's. As director of the "30's" unit, Robert Mann and Robert Siodmak were turning out 
extremely stylish films. In the early 40's however, Florey returned to Warners 
and much bigger pictures like "The Desert Song" and "The Beast With Five Fingers". 

Florey's first period at Warners (1933-1935) produced a dozen interesting films, 
following a handful of bigger pictures at Paramount and Universal, and one 
independent. The Warner contract was his first extended one, and Warner 
producers, big and small, were expected to do as they were told and take what was 
given. Florey's Warner assignments included a couple of soap operas, but they 
were mainly crime thrillers. He was desperately trying to get Warners machinery 
— and partially because of it — his films there were never quite as 
personal or as innovative as they would be at Paramount. He didn't yet have 
the clout to re-write and re-shape material assigned to him, and if Warners 
wanted a six-reeler for a specific package, they wouldn't have been happy with 
an eight-reeler. Moreover, Warners' standing sets were geared more to modern, 
realistic dramas, so he didn't have the exotica to fall back on that he would 
have at Paramount. But there were compensations; he had call on an excellent 
group of players and some fine cameramen. Too, Warners used their B movies to 
train upcoming directors, so ambitious and talented people often filled lesser 
roles in the crew. On this film, one finds two upcoming directors: Frank 
McDonald (as a dialogue director, not that Florey needed such assistance) and 
Terry Morse (as editor). Warners' photographic and editing styles allowed for 
and even demanded good lighting and cornering the "30's" look; here, Florey does specialize in excellently 
lit closeups of the many sinister suspects, and a really rapid-fire pace, 
the latter especially helping what might have been a static imitation of 
the previous year's hit "Roman Express" (which incidentally we are playing in the 
Spring). Florey also composes and frames his shots dramatically, and is 
especially adept at handling extras. (Sometimes he even has them move in such 
interesting and unorthodox ways that one assumes they are to be part of the plot, 
instead of which they are merely part of a more-realistic-than-usual background). 
True, the stock shots of the locomotives don't always match — but then maybe 
they did change trains at Lausanne or elsewhere en route! Anyway, it's a neat 
and enjoyable little mystery, made the more so (in retrospect) by having the 
three lead players composed of the Sam Spade and Gutman from the first "Maltese Falcon" engaged in a similarly mysterious relationship with the Brigid 
O'Shaughnessy from the later version!

— William K. Everson

Program Ends approx. 11.04.
No discussion period today evening.

A P.S. to our "Dracula's Daughter" program. In the discussion period afterwards 
I drew something of a blank in response to one question, and could only come up 
with two or three additional credits for Gloria Holden, whose first film it was. 
Other credits, up to her last film ("This Happy Feeling") in 1956, include 
"The Life of Emile Zola", "Kodachrome City", "Miracles for Sale", 
"Test Pilot", "The Corrigan Brothers", "A Gentleman After Dark", "Dream Wife" 
"The H cocktails" and "Killer McCoy" — a total of some 30 pictures.