Hollywood's first tiltlings with the Spanish Civil War

THE LAST TRAIN FROM MADRID (Paramount, 1937) Directed by James Hogan
Screenplay by Louis Stevens and Robert Wyler from a story by Paul Harvey and Elsie Fox; Camera, Harry Fischbeck; Music, Boris Morros; 77 mins.
With: Dorothy Lamour (Carmelita Castillo); Lew Ayres (Bill Dexter); Gilbert Roland (Eduardo de Soto); Karen Morley (Baroness Rafitte); Lionel Atwill (Col. Vigo); Helen Mack (Lola); Robert Cummings (Juan Ramos); Olympe Bradna (Maria Ronda); Anthony Quinn (Capt. Alvarez); Lee Bowman (Michael Balk); Louise Carter (Rosa Delgado); Hooper Atchley (Martin); John Picori (Hotel clerk); Frank Ford (Donald MacLeod); Stanley Fields (Avila); Harry Worth (Gomez); Francis Ford (Pedro Elias); charcoal burner); Evelyn Brent (Woman officer); and Jack Perrin, Karl Hackett, Otto Hoffman, John Merton, Harold March, Nigel de Brulier, Stanley Price, George MacQuarrie, Charlie Stevens, Harry Seals, Rollo Lloyd, Henry Brandon, Carl Harbaugh, Maurice Cass, Donald Reed, Harry Woods, Ben Hendricks, Stanley Andrews, Bess Flowers, Merrill McCormick, Robert Strange, Robert Middlemass, Bob McKenzie, Spencer Charters, Frank Reich, Egon Brecher, Hans Schum, Christian Rapp.

Hollywood in the 30's was notably reluctant to take any kind of a stance on European political affairs - and not necessarily through lack of courage or convictions on the part of studio heads. Exhibitor groups resisted it, and were strong enough to arrange effective boycotts. Pressure groups were constantly at work, and towards the end of the 30's the Hollywood Blacklist ran into official opposition. Although the war in the Far East had been raging throughout the thirties, Hollywood films were used merely as a convenient backdrop for stories of crime, smuggling and newsreel cameraman initiative. The Nazi rise to power was at least referred to, but generally in rather pussy-footing terms, usually serving as a launching-pad for a dramatic or romantic story, which then took over. Several films, such as Whale's "The Road Back", which were deemed to have gone too far, were substantially cut and/or reshot before release. Small wonder then, that if Hollywood had anything to do with World War II, it sought to advantage of the Eastern war and the Nazi rise (both of which were essentially monumental powers and which were not likely to be too critical about the Spanish Civil War, which had far greater political implications). The awareness raised issues on which outsiders were almost forced to take sides. If it has no other distinction, "The Last Train from Madrid" at least has that of being the first Hollywood film to acknowledge the Spanish conflict. (A technical exception: the British-made but Hollywood financed "Wings of the Morning" of the year before, which makes reference to it in a brief sequence). However, just as Lew Ayres plays the American newspaperman as happy-go-lucky and aloof, seeing only a good story in the war, so Hollywood greets the war as something almost staged for its own benefit, to provide a different background for a formula-action story. Hollywood has always been such an isolated community that it's not too hard to understand its attitude that the world is divided into two Hollywoods - and the Outside World.

Apart from its mildly distasteful exploitation of tragedy as a basis for melodrama, "The Last Train from Madrid" is a curious film. With that cast (even though none of the leads were exactly major players, being either on the way up (Quinn, Lamour), newcomers under training (Bradna), once bigger stars in temporary doldrums (Ayres) or veterans in various stages of decline (Atwill, Karen Morley) it clearly is more than a "B". Yet it doesn't quite make it as an "A", perhaps due to the utilisation of James Hogan as the director. An efficient and workmanlike director of "B's" and programmers, Hogan made five films in 1937, including the dog Drummond, a Zane Grey western, and "Bbd Tide", a fairly minor film but technically (especially in the utilisation of the still new and novel Technicolor). The overall slickness of production, and the omnipresence of so many interesting players, makes it consistently interesting, but it never quite achieves the drive it might have had if Robert Florey had directed. Nevertheless, in his utilisation of standing sets (including one from "The Devil is a Woman") and snappy editing, Hogan shows much the same ability as Florey in getting a lot out of a little.

The cast, for the most part, is first-rate, with all sorts of interesting players and old-timers showing up in bits. For top billing, Dorothy Lamour has remarkably little to do, with no more than six or eight lines of dialogue in the whole film. And for the key role that he plays, Anthony Quinn (still regarded as useful but not very hot) gets surprisingly low billing. One could do without Helen Mack and Robert Cummings entirely - they might have made it as American tourists stranded by the war, but as Spanish peasants they never once convince, nor do they try very hard. Lionel Atwill is uncharacteristically sympathetic for once.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

BLOCKADE (Walter Wanger Productions-United Artists) Directed by William Dieterle; Original story and screenplay, John Howard Lawson; Camera, Rudolph Mate; Music, Werner Janssen; Special Effects by Russell Lawson and James Basevi. 84 mins.

(over...)
With Madeleine Carroll (Norma); Henry Fonda (Marco); Leo Carrillo (Luis); John Halliday (Andre Gallinet); Vladimir Sokoloff (Basil); Robert Warwick (General Valelho); Reginald Denny (Edward Grant); Peter Godfrey (Magician); Katherine DeMille (Cabinet girl); William B. Davidson (Commandant); Fred Kohler (Pietro); Carlos de Valdez (Mayor del Rio); Nick Thompson (Beppo); George Macrae (Singer); Lupita Tovar (Palm Reader); Rosina Galli (waistress) and George Byron, Ed Brady, Richard MacCrawrie, Dick Alexander, Harry Semels, Hugh Prosser, Arthur Aylesworth. George Hively, Herbert Heywood, Carl Stockdale, Skins Miller, Belle Mitchell, Cecil Weston.

"Blockade", regardless of its merits purely as a film, must surely be one of the most mineralized films of the last thirties, especially as it was made at a time when pressure groups were rampant, the Production Code was imposing stifling restrictions, and Hollywood was geared to turning out escapists rather than "serious" films. True, it has many flaws; its art direction creates a Never-Never-Land or Rutania rather than a convincing Spain, and it is at times quite heavy-handed, almost in the pictorial-symbolist style of the Russian silents. And, like the preceding film, it does deliberately avoid taking sides - or even identifying them - while letting the war take second place to plots of romance and espionage. Nevertheless, the remarkable thing is that it was made: by a producer frequently willing to tackle controversial material, by a director of considerable prestige (Dieterle made it between his Zola and Juarez biographies at Warners), and clearly with the intent of arousing outrage on the part of the viewers. There was substantial pressure to have the film abandoned, and apparently Wanger did have to compromise and soften certain elements. Nevertheless, as a Radio City Music Hall film it attracted the attention that Wanger wanted, and though it continued to play to opposition from pressure groups around the country (where it was banned in certain cities) it did, rather surprisingly, show a substantial profit. Perhaps it had even more to do with the curiosity of audiences who look back, not realizing the difficulties of the times in which it was made, and also have a convenient political scapegoat in John Howard Lawson, later identified as one of Hollywood's foremost Communist writers. Since Russia was the only country at the time to openly ally itself with the Communist cause, it was understandable certainly that a writer with Communist sympathies should be assigned to the film. However, Fonda's final direct appeal to the audience is an emotional one, an appeal for reason and help. It is certainly not a political lecture alone; it makes the film as a whole satisfying. As for the film (in later years) being cited as an example of insidious propaganda, Plot-wise, the film is a direct descendant of both Pabst's silent "The Love of Jeanne Ney" and Lewis Milestone's "The General Died at Dawn" (1936), with the links reinforced by the presence of Vladimir Sokoloff in two of the three films, and by Madeleine Carroll playing virtually the same role in the two American films (a role also very close to that played by Edith Jeanne in the Pabst film). "Blockade" is superficially less realistic than "The Last Train from Madrid" in that it was made independently and without benefit of the standing sets and outdoor backlot space of a major studio. Thus it has a very stylized, studio-bound look to it, not always appropriate to the starkly realistic contemporary story it tells. Its failure to identify the two sides in the conflict does not make the film a trifle confusing at times today. But not so in 1938; since it was considered a major test ground for Fascism, the Spanish Civil War was covered extensively not only for its news value but also in political editorials. Even without television, people were well informed about the issues of the war at the time, and could bring that knowledge to the film with them.

--- William K. Everson

Program Ends: 10:29
Followed by brief discussion period.
No program next week: Easter break. Series resumes

SACKCLOTH AND ASHES Dept. In the credits for "The Mystery of Mr. X" two weeks ago, I referred to one of its original titles (in printed form) as "Mr. versus Rex". Charles Shihuk, an eminent authority on the detective novel and writer for "The American Detective" advises that the title should be "X v. Rex". Since it was Mr. Shihuk who supplied me with the (correct) literary chronology in the first place, I hereby make apologetic amends. When time permits, I will do penance by sitting through all of the Roland Winters Charlie Chan in one sitting. Wke