A Halloween Session of Mystery, Melodrama and Horror
(in that order)

As usual with our traditional Halloween triple bill, we are excluding any introductory comments or closing discussion. The films are all quite short, and there will be a five-minute transition between each feature, allowing us to finish at a few minutes prior to 11:00. Any comments or questions can be added to next week's discussion session.

THE SECRET OF THE BLUE ROOM (Universal, 1933) Directed by Kurt Neumann
Screenplay by William Hurlbut from the story by Erich Phillipi;
Camera, Charles Stumar; 65 mins.
With: Lionel Atwill (Baron von Hellsdorf); Gloria Stuart (Irene von Hellsdorf); Paul Lukas (Captain Walter Brink); Edward Arnold (Commissioner Foster); Onslow Stevens (Frank Faber); William Janney (Thomas Branét); Robert Barrat (Paul); Muriel Kirkland (Betty); Russell Hepton (Max); Elizabeth Patterson (Mary); Anders van Haeden (The Stranger); James Durkin (Foster's assistant).

"The Secret of the Blue Room" starts off with Universal's beloved Swan Lake main title music, and in the very first scene we're into a spiced-up and partially decorated re-use of the living room set from "The Old Dark House", so we know we're on familiar territory. Clearly designed to be a hasty bonus to Universal's profitable horror films of the period, it's essentially a mystery and not a particularly problematical one. The identity of the killer is all too obvious even before he begins his degradations, but that hardly matters as long as Atwill glowers menacingly and Stumar's camera prowls so stylishly. The plot is a good one (and provided the basis for two "B" remakes in the late thirties and early 40's) and while the ending could be a bit more imaginative, one doesn't feel inclined to carp. Incidentally, the film was reputedly Universal's cheapest production in 1933, made virtually on a B-western budget. The economy never shows, and it's a handsome production, but of course having all those cost-conscious players on hand, plus those re-usable sets, certainly helped in keeping the cost down.

-- 5 minute intermission --

THE TICKET OF LEAVE MAN (George King Productions, 1937; British release by MGM) Directed by George King; screenplay by H.F. Maltby and A.E.Rawlinsen from the play by Tom Taylor; Camera, Hone Glenning. 70 mins.
With Tod Slaughter (The Tiger); Marjorie Taylor (May Edwards); John Warwick (Bob Brierly); Robert Adair (Hawshawk, the Detective); Frank Cochran (Melter Moss); Peter Gawthorne (Joshua Gibson); Jenny Lynn (Mrs Willeughby); Arthur Payne (Sam Willeughby)

This is only the third Tod Slaughter melodrama we've played, some of his forays into unrestrained melodrama being a bit more even for New School and not those encountering him for the first time tonight, suffice to say that both on stage and screen in the thirties and forties, Tod brought back the classic (and mainly Victorian) melodramas, played so full-bloodedly that they could be accepted either as the real thing - or as semi-burlesques. Tod played the villainous leads to the hilt, while his heroes and heroines were usually played by earnest young actors on the way up whose completely serious performances were an effective counterpoint to Slaughter's robust over-acting. "The Ticket of Leave Man" is actually a little more sober and restrained than most of them, lacking the comic relief for the original work, and is also the least known of the whole series. While most of them have had some kind of limited release in this country, if only as part of a tv package, this one always seems to be excluded, probably because of Frank Cochran's Fagin-like villain, which tv would probably find an unacceptable stereotype.

Perhaps the film's major academic interest lies in the fact that the Victorian play on which it was based introduced the first private eye to fiction and the theatre in the person of Hawshawk the Detective. The very name because a slang expression for a detective, and a popular comic strip of the same name existed in this country in the 30's (and possibly earlier) in which Hawshawk was a comic lampoon of Sherlock Holmes. Here Hawshawk is played straight, his pompous dialogue lifted from the original play. An earlier British version was made in 1918 with Aubrey Fitzmaurice as Hawshawk, and even that was preceded by an American (Biograph) version of 1914.

Though a little more restrained than usual, Tod polishes off his victims with his customary aplomb, chuckles fiendishly at every opportunity (which seems to alert nobody's suspicions) and has a grand time pleasuring for "a little kiss" from the hapless heroine and then overpowering her with his lechery. The print is an exceptionally good one, and while the film lacks the pellucid of its Universal book-end companions, we think you'll find Tod, sandwiched in between Lionel and Bela, grand fun.

-- 5 Minute intermission --

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MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE (Universal, 1932) Directed by Robert Florey
Produced by Carl Laemmle Jr. Screenplay by Tom Reed and Dale van Euty, with additional dialogue by John Huston, suggested by the novel by Edgar Allan Poe: Camera, Karl Freund. 65 minutes
With: Bela Lugosi (Dr. Mirakle); Sidney Fox (Camille); Leon Ames (Pierre Dupin); Noble Johnson (James, The Black One); Bert Roach (Paul); Brandon Hurst (Prefect of Police); D'Arcy Corrigan (Keeper of the Morgue); Betty Ross Clarke (The Mother); Herman Bing (German gentleman); Arlene Frances (Streetwalker)

Despite our fondness for Robert Florey as a director, for the horror film as a genre and for Lugosi as a performer, "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is a film that we haven't run until now. While it still plays occasionally on tv, it has virtually disappeared from theatrical revivals, perhaps because it is considered one of the most dated of the early horror films. In some ways it is, but it is also one of the most interesting.

Neither the first nor the last "Murders in the Rue Morgue", it is probably the version that owes the least to Poe; even Poe's detective hero has been turned into a romantic medical student. However, it is quite the most savage of all the horror films up to 1932, and indeed remains one of the most violent of all of the horror films of the 30's. It's as though Florey, disappointed at not being allowed to direct "Frankenstein" as initially planned, was out to prove that he could make the grisliest chiller of them all. But he was also a craftsman, and style shines out from every frame, sometimes in camera set-ups so complex (e.g., the swing scene in which the camera is itself mounted on the far end of the swing) as to belie the film's reportedly low budget and brief shooting time.

Moreover, since the horror film was already noted for its Gothic undertones and echoes of German expressionism, Florey and cameraman Freund - and art director Hall - clearly decided that the best way to out-do everyone else was to remake the film that virtually started it all, the 1920 "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari". A loose remake, true - but the continuity and design are much the same, as is the characterization of the villain as a fairground charlatan. The charnel house of horrors does (tactfully) stop short of the mating of gorilla and girl, but that is clearly what it is the doctor's mind. While a model of decorum compared with such contemporary so-called horror films as "The Re-Animator", "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is quite a rough picture for its day, and some of its shock scenes still carry quite a punch. If there was a little more conviction in the depiction of the ape, which changes size and shape too often for comfort, it might well have been something of a minor classic. As it is, it is rather bursting at the seams with shock and visual style, and the film is too short to accommodate both comfortably.

Nevertheless, it is a joy to watch - and listen to - Bela Lugosi as he delivers some of his choicest lines with that musical diction and curious hesititation that was such a distinctive trademark of his. It remains one of his most malevolent, and pleasing, performances.

Incidentally, while no footage has been added, this particular print has been re-cut to conform to the way that Florey shot it. Universal, for some inexplicable reason, reshaped it - the moody atmospheric titles cutting right into the carnival scenes where Lugosi first encounters the girl. The original cutting is much more effective, since it allows Lugosi's modus operandi to be established, so that when we meet the girl we know exactly what he's up to, and the sense of menace is much greater. We think you'll agree that it works far better this way, and re-arranging the footage has been a virtually seamless operation except that at the end of the key interchanged scene a dissolve would have been added (had it been released that way) and we have to make do with a direct cut instead. (It isn't going to be our practice to re-cut and re-edit films at whim, but on this occasion it seemed to be justified).

William K. Everson

Program finishes 10.59.