THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 52: Program #2
February 21, 1986

2 MGM MURDER MYSTERIES

THE LONGEST NIGHT (MGM, 1936) Directed by Errol Taggart; Produced by Lucien Hubbard and Samuel Marx; Screenplay by Robert Andrews from the novel "The Longest Night" by Corneliu Ganz; Music by Edward Ward; NY premiere, Rialto Theatre; 50 minutes.

With Robert Young (Charley Phelps); Florence Rice (Joan Sutton); Julie Haydon (Eve Sutton); Ted Healey (Sergeant); Janet Beecher (Mrs Briggs); Leslie Fenton (Carl Briggs); Catherine Doucet (Mrs Wilson); Sonny Bupp (Junior Wilson); Sidney Toler (Capt Holt); Paul Stanton (Grover); Etienne Girardot (Mr Kinney); and Samuel S. Hinds, Olin Howland, Minor Watson, Kitty McHugh, Gertrude Sutton, John Hyams.

As most of you know (from last week's notes and notices posted this week as well as the School's taped messages) MGM failed to come up with "Murder in the Private Car" this week -- and in addition, it took the longest time to convince them that "The Longest Night" existed and was their picture! However, while I regret any changes including this one, it happens to be a rather fortuitous one. It foretells how pronounced a cartoonized element in "The Longest Night" making it rather too similar to "Murder in the Private Car". "Under Cover of Night", which we've had to eventually anyway, is far better than I'd remembered it, and does make for a much stronger program. Almost nobody (even apart from MGM) seems to have heard of "The Longest Night", perhaps because it is their shortest ever feature at 50 minutes (Laurel & Hardy's 4 reel "Beau Ranks" was designed as an "in-between" featurette) and that is an extremely awkward time for tv usage. The print supplied seems totally unused. I remembered it well (if not too accurately) from the 1950s television show made it look like a "typical" Universal film, and the film has lots of spooky scenes which stay in the memory, but also enough comedy that prevented me, as a child, from finding it nightmarish. The NY Times review was absolutely horrendous; somewhere between my childish enthusiasm and their undistilled hatred the real truth lies. Actually it's a glossy little thriller, well-mounted and well-cast, with some good thrill scenes and a novel idea of a murderer loose in a department store at night. Many of our favorite cliches are trotted out on cue, especially the informer who loudly tells police that yes, he'll reveal the murderer, and that his name is...course he can't remember it. Stanton, of course is the smug floorwalker in "Bachelors Mother", here rehashes by playing the same role with more sinister undertones. Given the short running time, there is too much comic padding, though Ted Healey is always fun to watch, and since there's really nothing wrong with the film other than its pacing being off, one wonders why MGM didn't do a little additional shooting. As it is, the villains are exposed very abruptly, and it would have been relatively easy to add another reel of mystery and suspense. (Unless the film ran that length originally, somewhat inexpertly, and the 50 minute release represents an edited-down salver's job.) Anyway, it's certainly a curio, far too brisk to be boring, and offers (as does the co-feature) the charming Florence Rice. Its brevity also allows us to precede it with an appropriate short.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

UNDER COVER OF NIGHT (MGM, 1937) Directed by George B. Seitz; Produced by Lucien Hubbard and Ned Marin; Camera, Charles Clarke; Original story and Screenplay by Bertram Millhauser; Music, William Axt; NY premiere, Rialto Theatre; 72 mins.

With Edmund Lowe (Christopher Cross); Florence Rice (Deborah Reed); Henry Daniell (Dr. Griswald); Nat Pendleton (Sergeant Lucks); Sera Hader (Janet Griswald); Dorothy Petersen (Susan Nash); Dean Jagger (Alan Shaw); Frank Reich (Brehmer); Zeffie Tilbury (Mrs Nash); Marla Shelton (Tanya van Horne); Theodore von Eltz (John Lamont); Harry Davenport (Duke); Raymond Walburn (Brother); Jameson Thomas (Capt. Burton); Pay Helm (Maggie); Johnnie Arthur (Coroner); Ray Turner (Hall Room boy); Mary Mclaren (alumni lady)

One of seven films that the versatile George B. Seitz knocked off in 1936, "Under Cover of Night" must have gone into production right after "The Longest Night" (by the same producer) and followed it into the Rialto in the first days of 1937. It's a suspender rather than a who-dunnit, with Henry Daniell clearly the murderer even before he commits his first crime, and then following through with prolific efficiency for a novice at the game, polishing off a total of four humans and one canine within a few hours, and making plans to murder and dismember another before fate catches up with him. The urbane Edmund Lowe has virtually nothing to do until the second half, so it's very much Daniell's show, and it's one of his best showcase vehicles, perhaps topped only by "The Body Snatcher". (which cliches are there again, along with the not so welcome dumb cop, the second this evening. The MGM polish is well in evidence, and Seitz keeps it moving along all the time, helped by the slick editing of Ben Lewis, Joseph H. Lewis' older brother. The plot of knocking off fellow faculty members in order to get the chairman's spot is a little hard to take; even if it worked, the murderer would then be stuck with an overload of courses and papers to grade! But logic was never a major problem in thrillers like this, especially those written by the prolific Bertram Millhauser. Just sit back, and enjoy the fun -- and wonder why this expert little film is so unknown.

Program ends: 10.12. Discussion follows

-- Wm. K. Everson