DAYBREAK (Rank-General Film Distributors, 1946) Directed by Compton Bennett; Produced by Sydney Box; Screenplay by Sydney and Muriel Box from a play by Nonceton Hoffs; Camera, Reginald Wyer; Music, Benjamin Frankel; 75 mins.
(Released in the U.S. by Universal in 1949)
With: Ann Todd (Truman); Maxwell Reed (Olf); Elizabeth Rigby (Bill Shackles); Bill Owen (Ron); Jane Hylton (Doris); Maurice Denham (Inspector); John Turnbull (Superintendent); Eliot Makeham (Bigley); Milton Rosmer (Governor)

If one accepts that a common denominator of film noir is that its protagonists are essentially losers, then tonight's two films certainly qualify: few of the cast members survive, and those that do remain losers! British noir peaked in 1947, just as it did in America, and both of tonight's films are from that period, though as a December 1946 release, "Daybreak" is technically from the prior year. There are major differences between the British and the American schools however; British noir is most influenced by the pre-war French cinema, whereas Hollywood drew more on German stylistics, and too, British noir dealt more with the problems of day-to-day living in post-war Britain, whereas Hollywood noir was dominated by a nightmare world of highly organised crime. (British crime was always rather seedy and inefficient, both in the movies and in actuality). "Daybreak", a perfect example of French influence (one can well imagine it with Gabin and Michele Morgan under Carne's direction), initially set out to be a prestige "Art" film. Director Compton Bennett had scored a resounding success with his first non-documentary film, "The Seventh Veil" (1945) which also (temporarily) thrust Ann Todd into front-rank stardom. Nobody at the time seemed to realise that it actually wasn't what it was. James Mason and Ann Todd made a fascinating role he played. Todd and Bennett made one subsequent film apiece, and then were reteamed for "Daybreak". It immediately ran afoul of the British censor, was withdrawn, and modified by means that will be very apparent when you see it. (The insertion of a new scene near the beginning puts the story into flashback and eliminates a censorial dilemma from the original climax). In these days of "reconstructions" it wouldn't be too difficult to re-structure "Daybreak" to its original shape, except that its already short length would be made even shorter, and would lack punch towards the end. Anyway, it is clearly no classic, and artistic integrity is minus James Mason and his sadistic romanticism, the film totally failed - despite its notoriety - to duplicate the success of "The Seventh Veil", and in an already grim postwar world, its murkiness seemed somewhat pointless. In any event, the British psyche was not capable of, and didn't want, the kind of emotional upheaval that is needed for poetic tragedy. (The best of the British noirs, "It Always Rains on Sunday", works to a tempo of constantly suppressed emotion). Incidentally, similar, superior and much more obscure British noir, "On the Night of the Fire" with Ralph Richardson and Diana Wynyard, will be playing at the Museum of Modern Art next. "Daybreak" is a misfire (and because of that almost never shown, here or in England) but a rather fascinating one. The print is not as good as one would like either, though the excellent quality of the co-feature compensates. A minor bonus (?) is the presence of Maxwell Reed as the oily seducer. Mr. Reed was Joan Collins' first husband, the one who tried to sell her to an Arab shark, and for a while enjoyed a brief vogue in British films, typcast in roles like this one. It's hard to understand what Britain's teen-aged girls saw in him (Joan Collins obviously saw something) but then British cinema was never abundantly supplied with dashing male sex symbols.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

MINE OWN EXECUTIONER (London Films-British Lion, 1947) Produced and Directed by Anthony Kimmins; Screenplay by Nigel Balchin from his novel; Camera, Wilkie Cooper; Music, Benjamin Frankel; 108 mins.
With Burgess Meredith (Felix Milne); Dulcie Gray (Patricia Milne); Kieron Moore (Adam Lucien); Barbara White (Mollie Lucien); Christine Norden (Barbara Edge); John Laurie (Dr. Grarten); Michael Shapley (Peter Edge); Lawrence Hanray (Dr. le Farge); Walter Fitzgerald (Dr. Pile); Martin Miller (Dr. Tautz); Jack Raine (Insp. Pierce); John Stuart (Dr. Hayling); Helen Haye (Lady Maresfield).

Part of the psychological cycle that descended on us after the war (Hollywood's major counterpart the same year was "The Locket"), "Mine Own Executioner" is a sister novel (and film) to Nigel Balchin's "The Small Back Room", to be filmed in 1945 by Powell & Pressburger. Dealing with a situation somewhat unique to British medical circles - the "lay" (but not "quack") psychiatrist. "Mine Own Executioner" is so well written and acted that it doesn't need any special stylistics that a Siroma has to bring it to Hollywood. Nevertheless, a marked directorial achievement - the first "serious" film from a writer-director, just back from six years of naval wartime service, whose only prior experience as a director had been on five George Formby comedies! Incidentally, and quite appropriately, the film opens after a 17th century quote from John Donne, whose writings provided foreword quotes for the Val Lewton horror films!

Program Ends: 10:53
(Discussion period next week)

"William K. Everson"