Economy and Expertise: The "small" crime film

DON'T TALK (MG M, 1942) Directed by Joseph Newman; Screenplay by Alan Friedman; Camera, Jackson Rose; 20 mins.
With: Don Douglas, Barry Nelson, James Warren, James Millican (the FBI men); Harry Wrth, Gloria Holden, Dvght Frye, Arthur Space (the spies) and Matt McHugh, Edward Heerme, Ivan Miller, Barbara Bedford.

Curiously "Don't Talk" isn't listed in Leonard Maltin's otherwise well-documented chronology of the "Crime Does Not Pay" series of two-reelers. It would be app. #37 in a series that ran from 1935 to 1947, some fifty shorts later. Like so many of the wartime entries, it combines melodrama with anti-Axis propaganda and appeals to public responsibility in curbing careless talk. Like all the films in the series, it utilizes contract players and existing sets (or ultra-economic new sets) largely by its skilful manipulation to let location shooting all times. Subtlety was never a strong point in this series, which had only two reels in which to hammer home both plot and message, but within those limits the series was exceptionally good and among other things was a useful training ground for stars and directors on the way up. Newman, who directed this one (and seven others, including the last in the series) went on to become a respected if not outstanding specialist in semidocumentary crime thrillers and film noirs.

The footnoted menu in the cafe, via whose neat, real relay their coded orders, is a nostalgic reminder of how good meals used to cost. And horror devotees will be delighted to find both Dracula's daughter and Renfield working for the Nazis:

BEHIND THE HEADLINES (Rko Radio, 1937) Directed by Richard Rosson; Produced by Clifford Reid; Screenplay by Edmund L. Hartman and J. Robert Bren from a story by Thomas Ahearn; Camera, Russell Metty; 56 minutes.
With Lee Tracy (Eddie Haines); Diana Gibson (Mary Bradley); Paul Guilfoyle (Art Martin); Donald Meek (Potter); Philip Hunsen (Bennett); Frank M. Thomas (Taylor); Tom Kennedy (Tiny); Doodles Weaver (Duggan); Ralph Robertson (Radio announcer); Dick Elliott (Bar tender); Edith Craig (Bennett's secretary); Stanley Blystone (Fire chief); Selmer Jackson (Dale); and George Irving, Gaylord Pendleton, Harold Huber, Tony Velez, Pedro Regas, Lynton Brent, Bud Garry, George Haragul, Lee Phelps, Edwin Stanley, Ann Hovey, Jane Walsh, Jerry Frank.

While I must admit that "Behind the Headlines" doesn't seem quite as exceptional the second time around, it is obviously the first impression that counts, or especially with "B" movies which, after all, were never intended for more than one encounter. What is so remarkable about this one is the care and "class" production. Its story - of rival newshounds double-crossing each other - could not be more typical of a whole genre of "B" actioners of the 30's. But it's well-acted, well-constructed, and doesn't waste time putting in either laughs or action just for their own sake. While the direction, however, is of physical action, the film moves well, real photography and art direction are of an exceptional order. It would have been very easy to shoot the climactic scenes in the same old Bronson Canyon caves right in Hollywood, but the scenes are tricked up with some very impressive glass shots to make them look much bigger. Only in the actual climax is there a letdown; after a suspenseful build-up, the final showdown and capture is disappointingly abrupt, the emphasis being more on the situation of heroines being menaced by master's criminal Donald Meek, in a neat reversal of style. The film is a sudden, snappy realizing that too much time and money has been on other areas, and that by cutting short that climax they could save an extra day's location shooting. It's just a guess - and in any case, the film is so good otherwise that that one shortcoming is a minor one. Compared to most Rko "B"s of the period, usually glossy but dull, it's way above the average, and certainly one of the best little 5-reelers of its year. Richard Rosson's directorial veteran dating back to the early silent period, was always a specialist in action and melodrama, and was also a first-rate 2nd unit director; his immediately prior chore to this one being the direction of all the logging sequences in "Come and Get It". Former model Diana Gibson was one of the most stylish of the "B" heroines of the mid-30's, playing opposite Buck Jones, John Wayne, Jack Holt and others.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

PERSONS IN HIDING (Paramount, 1938 released 1939) Directed by Louis King; Screenplay by William A. Lipman and Horace McCoy based on the book of the same title by J. Edgar Hoover; Camera, Harry Flashback; 70 mins.
With: Lynne Overman (Pete Griswold); Patricia Morrison (Dorothy Bronson); J. Carroll Naish (Freddy "Gunner" Martin); William Henry (Den Waldrim); Helen Twelvetrees (Helen Griswold); William Frawley (Alec Inglis); Judith Barrett (Blonde); Dennis Morgan (Flagler); William Collier Jr. (Harry Denning (Powder); May Boley (Madame Thompson); Virginia Mooney (Miss Boone); John Hartley (Joe Butler); Leona Roberts (Ma Bronson); Philip Foster (Curly); John Eldredge (Gordon Kingsley); Richard Carle (Pa Bronson); Roy Gordon (John Mast); Jack Hart (eternographer); Lillian Yarbo (maid); Jim Pierce (man); Archie Twitchell (co-pilot); Pat O'Malley (deputy driver); Lee Phelps (BFI driver); Raymond Hatton (Hadley); Perry Irons (fingerprint expert); Syd Saylor (gas station attendant); Billy Engel (newsboy).
Theodor von Eltz (Attorney Jenson); Eddie Acuff (Collins); Joe North (butler); Ivan Miller (chief porter); Stanley Price (Nick Ellis); William Haade (First Mate); Paul Barrett (Bank cashier). **Note: Dennis Morgan and Virginia Vale are cast-listed under the names they were using then, Richard Stanley and Dorothy Howe.

Paramount "B's have frequently been far superior to their "A"s, and we have shown many films in this series to back up that contention: "Dr. Broadway", "Buy Me That Town", almost anything by Robert Florey. One reason is that Paramount was under a massive company, and a few of their biggest "A"s there was always an attempt to economize where possible, to use short cuts (back projection, b/w instead of color, long padded takes instead of crisp editing) which invariably showed up on-screen to the film's disadvantage. The B however, usually had a tight budget where any savings would be too negligible to justify shaving costs, so directors tended to get the most out of their budgets, and to upgrade quality by injecting personal style (especially in the semi-conscious company, using studio facilities to the very maximum - contract players and technicians, stock footage, existing sets etc. Compare some of Paramount's 1939 "B's" - this one, "Disbarred", "Death of a Champion", "Ambush", "Island of Lost Men" - with some of their typical "A"s of the same year - "Zeza", "Paris Honeymoon", "The Star Maker", "Rulers of the Sea", "St. Louis Blues" - and the overall superioritiy of the Bs, both on a dollar-for-dollar basis and in terms of filmic skill, is quite apparent. Even DeMille's "Union Pacific", certainly one of the best, should not be confused with "cheating" in the name of economy. Possibly only "Midnight" and "Beau Geste", among all the Paramount "A"s that year, are such good films that they need no apology and certainly offer no economic short-cuts.

Although not one of the very best Paramount Bs, lacking the ultimate directorial style that Robert Florey would have brought to it, "Persons in Hiding" is still a model of the expert crime B. Paramount had been making many of these since the mid-30's (most of which we've run, several of which are still to come) and in 1939, with the renewed interest in the gangster film, sought to inject new life into their crime series by basing one of them (which was based, in fact, on material in the same book, followed within a year) "persons in Hiding" remains the best and most distinctive, partly because the script, based loosely on the Bonnie and Clyde story, is so strong. Few of the characters, good or bad, are stereotypes. Horace McCoy, a good writer of crime stories, has something of the flair of Rowland Brown in his ability to present realistic and convincing details in the casual, day-by-day lives of criminals and their cohorts. It's a little difficult to see just why Patricia Morrison (her film debut) is so enamored of J. Carrol Naish, but to his credit he underplays well, much so than in a prior outing for Louis King, "Illegal Traffic". The film moves at brisk clip, using stock footage periodically to punctuate the man-hunt theme, and comes to a surprisingly effective (if sudden) ending on a note of drama and pathos rather than melodramatic action. King isn't quite up to the ending, and at certain points would have gotten more out of it. But its novelty makes up for a partially billed Helen Twelvetrees (the lead in another Paramount "B" of the same year, "Unmarried") has only about a minute of footage. In terms of musical scoring the film is often quite off-beat too. Liszt's "Battle of the Huns" figuring in an early chase scene, while the final cast and playout music consists of "Two Sleepy People (too much in love to say Goodnight)"; one wonders if this can be attributed to scorer Morris Moros, or whether it was the "contribution" of a sound editor, slapping music on without any awareness of the irony of his choice!

Program finishes 10.20. Discussion/Questions session follows.

Notices: A reminder (especially for those not present at the prior four programs) that the films announced for November 21 have been withdrawn by the distributors, and have been replaced with TWO AGAINST THE WORLD (1932, with Constance Bennett) and THE BIG SHOT (1942, with Humphrey Bogart).

As mentioned in a recent discussion session, the Museum of Modern Art's British melodrama series starting in November contains many films that our audience here would be interested in - being shown for the first time in some cases, and available only in 35mm, hence our own inability to rent prints to show here in the past. HIGHLY recommended are THE NIGHT OF THE FIRE, THE NURSEMAID WHO DISAPPEARED (STRANGE BOARDERS) and to a lesser extent PCIFER and THE BROTHERS (much superior to the heavily censored and changed U.S. version that we showed a few years back. We recommend picking up a schedule from MOMA (most films are shown twice) and I will also have a detailed article on the best of these films in the November issue of FILMS IN REVIEW which may be useful to those of you seeking more information.

--- William K. Everson