THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 55: Program #5
March 13, 1987
A Friday the 13th Triple Bill of (Tasteful) Maniacs on a Rampage

MENACE (Paramount, 1934) Directed by Ralph Murphy; Screenplay by Anthony Veiller and Charles Sprague from an original story by Philip MacDonald; Camera, Ben Reynolds; 57 mins.

With Gertrude Michael (Helen Chalmers); Paul Cavanagh (Colonel Greco); Henrietta Rossman (Mrs Thornton); John Lodge (Ronald Cavendish); Robert Allen (Andrew Forsythe); Ray Milland (Freddie Bastion); Berton Churchill (Norman Bellamy); Dennis O'Keefe (Underwood); Halliwell Hobbes (Skinner); Montague Love (Police Chief); Irene Llewellyn (Cynthia Bastion); Arletta Duncan (Gloria Chalmers); Gwenllian Gill (Allison Bastion); Forrester Harvey (Wilcox)

First of all, we owe our audience an apology for the poor condition of the print. The print we were supposed to get (and had pre-screened about a year ago) suddenly, and through nobody's fault, became unavailable just a few weeks ago. Since the film isn't in official distribution and is quite rare, this presented a major problem: even if we could come up with an acceptable substitute, it had to be of the same length, the same exact kind of film, and one we'd never shown. A tall order in itself, made complicated by the fact that a decision had to be made almost immediately, so that a change of program could be announced if necessary. Fortunately this print did present itself, even though it is itself the victim of a mad-ty-slasher-(of the Bell and Howell killer cult) with the most magnificent set of out-of-screen scratches we've seen come out of a year. But faced with the choice of an unsatisfactory substitute or running the marred print, we went with the latter. Since it isn't a Sternberg or a Ford, we don't feel we're desecrating a masterpiece. The film is otherwise in pretty good shape, and except when lovely Gertrude Michael wanders over and under the scratches, they're not unduly distressing.

Although it only opened at the Rialto, the film received good reviews, and was considered well above average of its type, as was its acting. It's too short to be subtle, and by the same token, too short to be boring or to give the audience time to notice the plot holes. Red herrings abound: the insane killer is known to suffer headaches by at least two of the suspects are made to complain of headaches! Eyes shift surreally, glances are pregnant with foreboding, the rain and lightning seems excessive given the Santa Barbara location, and the climax, despite some surprises along the way, is not likely to surprise anyone too much. Needless to say, the killer - urbane, cheerful and helpful throughout - suddenly becomes a raving maniac at the moment of exposure!

-- FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION --

TERROR ABOARD (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Paul Sloane; Screenplay by Harvey Thew and Manuel Sef from a story by Robert Presnell; Camera, Harry Fishbeck; 69 mins.

With: John Hubbard (Maximilian Kreig); Charlie Ruggles (Blackie); Neil Hamilton (James Cowle); Vera Teasdale (Milocent Hazlitt); Shirley Grey (Lili Kingston); Jack La Rue (Gregory Cordoff); Morgan Wallace (Martin Hazlitt); Thomas Jackson (Captain Allison); Stanley Fields (Captain Swanson); Paul Porcasi (Chef); William Janney (Radio Operator); Frank Hagney (Mate); Leila Bennett (Lena); Clarence Wilson (Ship's Doctor); Paul Hurst (Boatswain); and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Marty Faust, Clem Beauchamp, Peter Hancock (seamen); Bobby Dunn (cross-eyed seaman) Kit Guard (murdered sailor)

Although director Sloane doesn't give the film the style or imagination it deserves, it hardly matters since all that's really important is the robust story-line and the solid cast of old reliables. The story gets its framework by pillaging the opening of "Beau Geste" (and its closing) and in between whips up a melodrama clearly inspired by the Marie Celeste mystery. (Other borrowings include some stark failure stock footage from Capra's "American Madness"!) Since the identity of the villain is revealed a few minutes in to the picture, it is giving away nothing to note that John Halliday tackles his mass-killer role with gusto, restraint, and an underplayed Tod Slaughter sense of humor - as when he shivers in mock alarm after having locked one of his victims in the deep freeze! Vera Teasdale (who died just a few days ago) and the whole cast perform heroically while they last, though as always when Charles Ruggles is cast in thrillers and horror films, and gets top billing, there's just too much of him. He's good, but through no fault of his own, intrusive. This could have been a major thriller in the "Ten Little Indians" tradition. Clearly the most isn't made of its potential, yet on the other hand, as a "B" it must have been a real bonus, and probably a better crowd-pleaser than the "A" it was supporting. Oddly enough, it isn't reviewed by the NY Times, so presumably didn't get even a double-bill opening in New York.

-- FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION --

("Horror Island" notes overleaf)
HORRIS ISLAND (Universal, 1941) Directed by George Waggner; Produced by Ben Pivar; Screenplay by Maurice Tombragel and Victor McLeod from a story by Alex Gottlieb; Camera, Elwood Bredell; 60 mins.
With: Dick Foran (Bill); Peggy Moran (Wendy); Leo Carrillo (Tobias); Fuzzy Knight (Stuffy); John Eldredge (George); Lewis Howard (Thurman); Hobart Cavanaugh (Jasper); Ralf Harolde (Rod); Iris Adrian (Arleen); Walter Catlett (McGoon); Fey Van Dongen (The Phantom); Emmett Vogan (The Stranger)

Quite frankly, I never thought the day would come when a humble "B" like this one would top the bill at the New School! Actually its moment of glory was thrust upon it due to the need for a similar (and equally short) film to complete our traditional Friday the 13th triple bill. Quite coincidentally, I used the film on a similar late night triple-horror-bill in Luxembourg just last year, where it proved to be a big success.

Actually, the need for an appropriate film sometimes brings a deserving little film out of the woodwork and this may well be the case here. Quite unambitious in 1941, "Horror Island" was designed to be the lower-half of a horror double bill with "Man Made Monster", but was given enough comedy content so that it could play on its own as a kind of pocket-"Ghost Breakers". Horror films, of a fairly standardised kind were on the way back in 1941; and Universal turned them out to a slick and enjoyable formula: good musical scores, handsome production values, and thrills that weren't rugged enough to really scare anyone but managed to be exciting and lively. "Horror Island" is an expert little film of its kind. George Waggner, who directed, made the minor classic "The Wolf Man" later the same year, and the stylish and atmospheric photography was the work of Woody Bredell, soon to be one of the foremost film noir specialists. Peggy Moran, seen here a few weeks back in "Spring Parade", never had the chance to really rival Fay Wray or Evelyn Ankers as a lady in distress, but she was extremely fetching draped over a monster's arms or strapped to a sacrificial altar. It's a pity that her horror career was limited to this film and "The Mummy's Hand". "Horror Island" gets under way immediately with no wasted time, and even the comic byplay is punctuation rather than padding. It perhaps doesn't have the stature of the first two films, so perhaps the trick is to regard those as a traditional double-feature, with "Horror Island" as a bonus -- or a sneak prevue. (42nd St. action houses in the 1950's had a neat little trick of padding a sagging double-bill by adding a "Sneak Prevue" for the weekend, said film usually being a 20-year-old western!) Anyway, it's unpretentious, good fun and well-crafted (as well as being non-bloody), something that probably can't be said for the other Friday the 13th homages playing around town tonight.

-- William K. Everson

Program Ends Approx. 10.52. No discussion period.

NOTICES:
I commented in last week's notes on some computer-errors that turned up in the New School Bulletin for the current semester. Another one has just come to light: our April 3 program is erroneously listed as April 7, a mid-week date. All our shows remain on F-days, and the April 3 date is correct. There is, by the way, no March 27 program because of the Easter break.
Also, I have just received a copy of the new Astoria Motion Picture Centre program and note that they are playing an interesting Cornell Woolrich triple-feature (LEOPARD MAN, FEAR IN THE NIGHT, STREET OF CHANGE) on Friday April 3. I mention this because we have STREET OF CHANGE booked for a Summer series date (July 15, a Wednesday). Normally I tried to avoid duplications like this, but in this particular case have decided to leave it alone, since the Astoria date coincides with our showing of Dupont's ON SUCH A NIGHT. This way at least you can weigh one against the other and have an extra opportunity to see STREET OF CHANGE.