VICE SQUAD (Paramount, 1931) Directed by John Cromwell; Story and screenplay by Oliver H.P. Garrett; Camera, Charles Lang; 80 mins.
With Paul Lukas (Stephen Lucarno); Kay Francis (Alice Morrison); Helen Johnson (Madeleine Hunt); William B. Davidson (Morrison); Rockefeller Fellowes (Det. Sgt. Matheny); Esther Howard (Josie); Monte Carter (Max Miller); Pat Collins (Pete); Phil Tead (Tony); Davison Clark (Doctor); Tom Wilson (Court attendant); James Durkin; William Arnold (Prosecutor) and Juliette Compton.
"VICE Squad" was one of the first movies to take up the issue of the crooked and corrupt cop, and to attack police methods, even though the concurrent gangster cycle was applauding the policeman and demanding that he be given more power. "VICE Squad" is typical of so many pre-Code melodramas (especially from Paramount!) which are not particularly outrageous in themselves, but which by virtue of a non-sympathetic hero, a low moral tone and a general air of sleaziness contribute to the concerns about possible censorship, and led to the industry's own self-imposed censorship via the Production Code.
Although it has more plot than action, it's quite a powerful film, leisurely but never ponderous, and gutsy enough to stick to the anti-VICE Squad principles expressed in the foreword, Helping it enormously is the very moving performance by Helen Johnson (so good also in a comedy role in "It Pays to Advertise") in a role made-to-measure for Helen Twelvetrees, but played by Johnson with even more warmth and subtlety. Curiously, although all the publicity material on this film refers to her as Helen Johnson, the decision to change her name to Judith Wood (possibly to avoid confusion with Kay Johnson) came just as the film was ready for release. She appears on the main titles as Judith Wood, and used that name subsequently, although her career didn't go as far as her talent indicated that it should. Kay Francis is somewhat lost in the shuffle - her role is both routine and unsympathetic - but of course it's always good to see her. While Paul Lukas was considered very much of a newcomer at the time, they worked newcomers hard then, and he had made more than twenty films over a four year period! Incidentally, when the film opened at the Paramount, Gilda Gray and Rudy Vallee headed the stage show.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

BUREAU OF MISSING PERSONS (Warner Bros-First National, 1933) Directed by Roy Del Ruth; Screenplay by Robert Presnell based on the book "Missing Men" by Capt. John H. Ayers and Carol Bird; Camera, Barney McGill; 70 mins.
(Last New School showing, June 1975).
With: Lewis Stone (Capt. Webb); Bette Davis (Norma Phillips); Pat O'Brien (Dutch Sanders); Glenda Farrell (Belle); Allen Jenkins (Joe Musik); Ruth Donnelly (Molly); Hugh Herbert (Glade); Alan Dinehart (Therme Roberts); Marjorie Gateson (Mrs. Paul); Talfy Walsh (Cesar); Noel Francis (Alice); Wallis Clark (Mr. Paul); Adrian Morris (Irish Conlin); Clay Clement (Kingman); Henry Kolker (Mr. Arno); Tom Wilson (Tony); Jean Muir (Louisa); DeWolf Hopper (Dinner customer); Lee Shumway (detective); Charles Sellon (minister); George Chandler (Romer Howard); and Harry Bercroft.

Although hardly outstanding in itself, "Bureau of Missing Persons" was ahead of its time and a forerunner of such American and British films as "The Naked City", "Gideon's Day" and "The Blue Lamp" in trying to create a composite picture of police methods, with a number of unrelated cases developed in parallel narrative. The fifth of Bette Davis' six 1933 pictures, it is directed by Roy Del Ruth with the same crackling pace as his earlier "Blessed Event" and "Blind Brownhill Strikes Back". Potentially grisly material is made genuinely funny by relatively tasteful handling and an underplayed cold-blooded delivery. It's surprising how funny (depending of course on one's taste for black comedy) discussions about stiched-up corpses, or a murder victim being ground up for fertilizer, can be when delivered by experts like Allen Jenkins and punctuated by that inevitable pre-Code query "Have you been smoking hop?". Fast-talking Pat O'Brien, and Lewis Stone, borrowed from MGM, make a good team and Alan Dinehart is, as always, so suave a villain that he deserves to get away with it! The fast-paced story is further speeded-up by such devices as the swish-pan, the iris-out, and the habit of starting scenes without establishing shots, surging right into an opening door so that the film is in constant motion. While the cases covered have little or no authenticity, one hopes that the detective methods employed used a certain amount of dramatic license. Stumped because kidnappers have a secure hideout and can only be communicated with by carrier pigeon, the resourceful Lewis Stone orders: "Have a fast plane standing by, and when that pigeon takes off, you follow it ....".

-- William K. Everson

Program Ends approx.10.20. Question and discussion period follow.

Note: I shall be away for the balance of the Summer program, leaving things in the capable hands of projectionist/impresario Rick Krammer. However, programs will start at 7.30 without introductions. All prints are on hand already so there will be no let-downs. The Fall schedule will be printed with the final (July 22) notes for this Summer season.

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