STREET OF CHANCE (Paramount, 1942) Directed by Jack Hively; Produced by Burt Kelly; Screenplay by Garrett Fort, based on "The Black Curtain" by Cornell Woolrich; Camera, Theodor Sparkuhl; Music, David Buttolph; 74 mins.

With Burgess Meredith (Frank Thompson); Claire Trevor (Ruth Dillon); Louise Platt (Virginia Thompson); Sheldon Leonard (Joe Marucci); Frédia Inescort (Alma Diederich); Jerome Cowan (Bill Diederich); Adeline de Walt Reynolds (Grandma Diederich); Arthur Loft (Sheriff Stebbins); Clancy Cooper (Burke); Paul Phillips (Schoeder); Keith Richards (Intern); Ann Doran (Miss Peabody); Eva Cline (Mailroom Girl); Edwin Maxwell (Stillwell); Gladden James (Mr. Clark); Harvey Tyler (Secretary); Ralph Dunn (Pireman); Mill Kibbee (Barber); George Watts (Pawnshop owner).

Both of tonight's films are often erroneously classed as "B" pictures. Actually, because of their length, care (spent in on location shooting in the other) and other factors, they both properly fit into the "programmer" category between the "B" and the "A". It's a subtle distinction; the programmers however usually had just enough extra budget and running time to achieve better results, and at the same time remaining such essentially second-class product (commercially) that they weren't harassed and supervised by the front office, giving the writers and directors a surprising amount of freedom.

"Street of Chance" is of importance in being the first of the nightmarish Cornell Woolrich stories to be adapted to the screen (there had been two earlier Woolrich adaptations, but not in the Noir school). It thus acted as a kind of launching pad for a whole series of Noir adaptations from the prolific pen(s) of Woolrich, also known as William Irish. His stories abounded in wild coincidence, but without that, they wouldn't have had the unique, surreal, pessimistic quality that made them such reflections of his own troubled personality. Although "The Black Curtain" saw the translation via a radio play with Cary Grant in the lead, this tight little thriller is still a satisfying and absorbing film, some of it developed in a cinematic style that improves on the original story, though its "surprise" ending is a bit minimised by movie conventions that are added on and thus turn the labyrinth ways into more recognisable and predictable paths. (The wife, for example, did not exist in the original story). What the film really lacks is directorial style; it was Jack Hively's first film as a director, and would remain his best, but had it been handled by Jack Hively and Anthony Mann, two other Paramount directorial newcomers of the period, it might have been a minor classic. Nevertheless, Theodor Sparkuhl's Germanic camerawork lends it strong pictorial values, and, as in Paramount's slightly earlier "Among the Living", jazz music is effectively combined with a theme of chaos and fear. And some shots -- especially the mysterious stranger pounding on and cracking the window of the taxi -- create a wonderful sense of terror of the unknown.

--- 10 Minute Intermission ---

THE BISCUIT EATER (Paramount, 1940) Directed by Stuart Heisler; Produced by Jack Moss; Screenplay Stuart Anthony and Lillie Hayward from an original story by James Street; Camera, Leo Tover. 80 mins.

With Billy Lee (Lennie McNeil); Cordell Hickman (Text); Richard Lane (Harvey McNeil); Lester Matthews (Mr. Ames); Helen Millard (Mrs. McNeil); Snowflake (Thesaoniaise); William Russell, Earl Johnson (Field judges).

Tragically, "The Biscuit Eater" is virtually a lost film. When Disney remade it (a sentimental, traditional, thoroughly inferior version) in the early 70's, Paramount no longer had any interest in protecting and/or preserving it, and no negative or 35mm material appears to exist. This print accompanied star Billy Lee to a recent Festival showings, but it is a film that should be protected and generally available. Most of Hollywood's boy-and-his-dog sagas tend to be sentimental and studio-bound. What a pleasure therefore to find that "The Biscuit Eater", which even in 1940 seemed exceptional, seems fresher and better than ever. Dog-lovers remember it well, and, rather surprisingly, many people remember it only for its grim, frightening visit to a swamp (scary because it is shot as through the eyes of children) and insist that it is a horror film! The most affecting film of its type since Jackie Cooper's "Skippy", and superior to and more mature even than that, it represents both an outstanding directorial debut at Paramount for newcomer Stuart Heisler, and one of the finest and most naturalistic child performances ever by Billy Lee. Interesting too, is the casual and unstated relationship between the white and black children, at a time when Hollywood dealt mainly in stereotypes. All told, a warm, appealing and thoroughly moving film, which at a showing at the Telluride Film Festival last year had an audience (jaded by "Blue Velvet" and "The Devil in the Flesh") giving way to unashamed tears. Since there is no discussion after the show, your own emotions, if of a like nature, can go undetected! --- William K. Everson

Program Ends app. 10:15