THE SPIDER AND THE FLY (Mayfair-Rank-General Film Distributors, 1949)
Directed by Robert Hamer; Produced by Audrey Baring; Directed the 1946 "Spiders" and then one screenplay, "A Jolly Bad Fellow", a 1963 black comedy of murders, and died that same year aged only 52. At the start, he seemed one of the most promising of the new directors, and "The Spider and the Fly" immediately followed the two genuine classics that marked the crest of his career - "It Always Rains on Sunday" and "Kind Hearts and Coronets". He scripted those films as well, and if "The Spider and the Fly" falls a little short, it's probably because he was not involved in the writing as well. None of his remaining six films, all much lighter in tone, measure up to his initial films (im fairness it must be admitted that 1945's "Pink String and Sealed Wax" does not survive well, although his 1953 "The Long Memory", another writer/director assignment, remains interesting and we plan to show it soon. "The Spider and the Fly" starts out like an Arsene Lupin thriller, and then suddenly changes direction, becoming like one of those Jean Paul Sartre melodramas where the right things happen for the wrong reason. Since surprise is one of its key elements, we'll say no more. It's a handsomely mounted film, set in Paris just before and during World War One, but despite the thrill and intrigue angles, it's a grey-toned, rather downbeat film, which is probably why it achieved little popularity at the time.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

THE RINGER (London Films-British Lion, 1952) Directed by Guy Hamilton; Produced by Hugh F. Hudson; Screenplay by Val Valentine and Lesley Storm from the play by Edgar Wallace; Camera, Ted Scaife and John Wilcox; Music, Malcolm Arnold; 78 minutes.
With: Herbert Lom (Maurice Meister); Mai Zetterling (Lisa); Greta Gynt (Cora Ann); Donald Wolfit (Dr. Lomond); William Hartnell (Sam Hackett); Normand Wooland (Insp. Bliss); Denholm Elliott (John Lenly); Doris Bryan (Mrs Hackett); Charles Victor (Insp.Wembury); Walter Fitzgerald (Commissioner); John Stuart (Gardener); John Slater (Bell)
The presence of this film in our series is almost accidental. A couple of years ago I was doing a big series of British mysteries in San Francisco, and at the last minute, one film became unavailable and this one, otherwise not considered, was the only possible immediate substitute. Much to my surprise, it was the hit of the season. It was also the first time I had seen it with an audience, proving how unreliable one's opinions can be when based on views in isolation. I think the reasons for its popularity in that series were three-fold: 1) although nearly 40 years old, it is a very polished and modern-looking production; 2) its cast is excellent, and it's a pleasure to watch; 3) it is a rattling good story. It may be an old chestnut to some, but the last British version was in 1958, released here by Monogram to minimal exposure, and never seen on TV. (That version was titled "The Gaunt Stranger"). Since this version was never released here at all, and given only minor TV exhibition Edgar Wallace's play from the 20's is probably still new and fresh to most contemporary audiences.
Filmed four times by the British and twice by the Germans, it may even work best with non-British audiences, less accustomed to British type-casting, and to the devices used by the numerous red herrings. Made by the Korda group at a time when they had taken over from Rank as producers of Britain's major quality films, it's on a much bigger scale than the three prior (one silent, two sound) British versions. It's British "U" censor certificate (equivalent to a "G" here) indicates that not too much mayhem takes place - yet the British censors were quirky, often giving an Adult rating to westerns and cartoons, and one would have thought that the suspense values alone, plus the big murder scene, would have rated it an "A". It's not a film for American audiences who may well be why this version was never released here, but even by the less moralistic British standards, it is surprising. In the two prior sound versions, the role of Sam Hackett was played by an established Cockney comic - Gordon Harker first, Sonnie Hale second - and as played by William Hartnell here (actor rather than comedian) in theatrical burlesque garb, it's the only element that dates at all, and that not seriously.

-- Wm.K. Everson