Two Enjoyable Light-weight Programmers

NIGHT KEY (Universal, 1937) Directed by Lloyd Corrigan; Screenplay by Tristram Tupper and John C. Moffit; Camera, George Robinson; Special Effects, John Fulton; 67 mins. NY premiere; Central Theatre
With Boris Karloff (Dave Mallory); Jean Rogers (Joan Mallory); Warren Hull (Travers); Hobart Cavanagh (Petty Louis); Samuel S. Hinds (Ranger); Edwin Maxwell (Kruger); Alan Baxter (The Kid); David Oliver (Mike); Ward Bond (Francis); Frank Reicher (Carl); George Hurbant (Spinelli); Charles Wilson (Chief of Police); Frank B. Raper (Ranger's Secretary); Emmet Vogan (reporter); Ethan Laidlaw, Frank Hagnusy, Ralph Duran (Benchmen); Henry Rocquemore (boarde); Roy Barcroft (office worker)

In 1936, Universal had planned "Dracula's Daughter" as a large-scale horror special to co-star Karloff, Lugosi and Colin Clive. When the British distributors turned an adamant "thumbs down" on more horror films, the studio scaled the film down in size and leaders, yanked Boris and Bela from it. Each had one picture left to go on their current contract (though both would be back in '39 when the new horror cycle began), so Lugosi was given a stock villain role in "Postal Inspector", while Karloff as usual fared rather better, and "Night Key" was at least a starring vehicle, tailored to him. Actually it has a strong and appealing plot, not unlike "Frankenstein" or the Claude Rains version of "Phantom of the Opera" in its basic motivation, and with more money and a better director it could easily have been expanded into an "A" film. As it is, it certainly had speed and pace and a remarkably good cast, but Corrigan, a comic actor, writer and director, tends to keep it on rather too even a keel and to give the boy-girl "padding" almost as much attention as the basic melodramatics. Nevertheless, it's an enjoyable and satisfying little thriller, atmospherically photographed by George Robinson, and with some minor but diverting electrical special effects. Boris, despite being naive enough to put his trust in shyster lawyer Edwin Maxwell, as alway as ever, comes out on top, beaming happily at the camera, Deanna Durbin fashion, for the fadeout!
-- Ten Minute Intermission --

AMATEUR DADDY (Fox, 1932) Directed by John Blystone; Screenplay by Doris Malloy and Frank Dolan from "Scotch Valley" by Mildred Cram; additional dialogue by William Conselman; Camera, James Wong Howe; 74 mins. NY premiere: Rexy With Warner Baxter (Jim Gladden); Marian Nixon (Sally Smith); Rita LeRoy (Lottie Pelgram); Lucille Powers (Olive Smith); William Pawley (Fred Smith #2); David Landau (Sam Pelgram); Clarence Wilson (Bill Henzen); Frankie Darro (Pete Smith); John Breslaw (Nancy Smith); Gail Kornfeld (Lily Smith); Harry Dunninson (Hanks); Edwin Stanley (Fred Smith #1) and Joe Machey, Nora Cecili, John Elliott.

Despite a rather trivial title, designed no doubt to stress the film's affinity to the successful Baxter-Gaynor Daddy Long Legs of the year before, "Amateur Daddy" is a surprisingly strong and often moving little film. Very much like a silent Mary Pickford vehicle, it mixes pathos, romance, comedy and melodrama in nearly equal doses, and is also very much of a reflective product of the depression years. There are a few plot loose-ends (did Warner Baxter ever complete his engineering project?) and some surprising lapses in expertise as for example a long-awaited fight between hero and villain that is badly staged (surprisingly so from the director of so many silent Tom Mix westerns) and also uncombing, done almost entirely in long shot presumably to hide the use of doubles for Baxter. Marian Nixon, via films like "Young Mr. Lincoln" of "The Storm Country" and of course this one was clearly being groomed for Pickford/Gaynor roles, but the vogue for them was already on the way out. However, it's a solid and pleasing example of that kind of film, benefitting a great deal from the extensive use of rural and outdoor locations, well photographed by James Wong Howe. It's also good to see again a couple of wonderfully unwholesome villains (Landau and Pawley), mean just because they like it that way. So many depression movies stressed the need for good neighborliness, but these rascals refuse to accept that as a way for curbing their greed and miserliness! An added bonus for the innate sadism in all of us is the episode of Rita LeRoy finally betraying husband Landau in the climax. We knew that after the End title she is going to have the tar wallopped out of her, and since she is also a somewhat unsympathetic character we can enjoy the prospect without guilt!

CARTOON SURPRISE: As is our custom when we have a program that is both light-weight and conveniently short, we're going to wind up with a quartet of 30's color cartoons. They'll remain nameless to maintain the element of surprise; suffice to say that they are charming, funny and sometimes grim, the highlight undoubtedly being a sequence in which a blind Shirley Temple doll barely survives an explosion, but later returns her eyeglasses to a talking Fetchit doll nodding off at the oxygen pump! This sequence may well be the highlight of the entire current series.
--- William K. Everson ---

Program Ends approx. 10:49.
No discussion session tonight. Thanksgiving break next week; next screening on Dec. 2.