Two quite unofficial homages to "The 39 Steps"

In 1941/42, Paramount, for reasons never either acknowledged, recognised or explained, decided to use Hitchcock's 1935 "The 39 Steps" as a rough basis for two new films. Possibly they had planned a remake, or possibly the limited re-release of Hitchcock's earlier film now that he was a big new prestige Hollywood director brought it to their attention, and it just seemed like a good idea at the time. Anyway, whether it was homage or plagiarism, the results were and are interesting, and are coupled together for tonight's program.

FLY BY NIGHT (Paramount, 1941; rcl: 1942; NY release delayed until 1943) Directed by Robert Siodmak; Produced by Sel G. Siegel; Assoc. Producer, Carl Morehead; Screenplay by Jan Drabnik from an original story by Sidney Sheldon and Ben Roberts; Camera, John Seitz; produced under the title "Dangerous Holiday"; British title "Secrets of G-32"; released in Europe under the title "A Murderer Has Escaped"; 76 mins.

With Richard Carlson (Dr. Jeffrey Burton); Nancy Kelly (Leslie Lindsey); Albert Basserman (Dr. Storm); Walter Kingsford (Heydt); Martin Kosciov (George Tieler); Miles Mandel (Prof. Langer); Arthur Loft (Detective Karnes); E.G. Gargan (Charlie Prescott); Adrian Morris (John Prescott); Oscar O'Shea (Pa Prescott); Michael Food (Ma Prescott); Neville Duke (Grube); Cy Kendall (Detective Ketcham); John Dilsco (Police surgeon); Stanley Blystone, Boots (Lester); Eddie Cuff (Sam); Eddie Dunn (patrolman); William Wright (秩序员); Marion Martin (nurse); Si Jenks (station guard); Clem Bevans (night watchman); Pat Moriarty (cabbie); WADE BOTELER (Sergeant)

"FLY By Night" is a deliberately ambiguous title which fits both its melodramatic story-line and the comic connotations of the phrase. Like a lot of the slickly produced Paramount thrillers of the period, it started out pre-Pearl Harbour as a topical melodrama with America still officially neutral (though with the nationalisation of the enemy agents never too much in doubt) and then was doctored very slightly at the last minute to bring it up to date for an America at war. The doctoring also included a lifting of a sub-plot (involved the disaster effects of the secret formula) which was originally included in an initial script for Fritz Lang's "Ministry of Fear".

It was Siodmak's second American film, and also the second of three (all with Richard Carlson) that he made for Paramount, the others being "West Point Widow" and "My Heart Belongs to Daddy". Although his career in France had included some thrillers, he had never been a specialist in that field, and in fact had once concentrated on lighter fare and had been considered a logical successor to Rene Clair. Although a small film - too long to be a routine "B", but in importance certainly no more than a programmer - "FLY By Night" is an auspicious beginning to his American noir career, and links him with Paramount's great noir cinematographer, John Seitz. It starts off superbly with an escape (during a thunderstorm) from an asylum, and a few minutes later the escapees (killer? maniac? spy?) telling Richard Carlson "This is a nightmare, and you're part of it now" - as good a combination of Hitchcock and noir as one could wish for. Very few more minutes and Richard Carlson discovers the stabbed spy in his apartment, and the machinations of "The 39 Steps" are set in motion. Apart from very neatly paralleling the basic plot structure and forced boy-girl relationship of the Hitchcock film, "FLY By Night" also provides non-imitative substitutes for other key scenes. The escape from the dock over the Forth bridge has its equivalent in a particularly neat scene of an escape from a car stacked up on a truck. The action scenes are particularly well done and staged, with a minimum of back projection fakery, and also a number of scenes of the London underworld through an iron gate boomerangs in this case, and the gate wrecks the car! The sequences of Hitchcock's pretend honeymoon-night sequence are duplicated here too - in fact it seems to be running quite outrageously into double-entendre sex and literally pulls up short, allowing the audience to anticipate a line that the Production Code probably wouldn't allow Richard Carlson to utter. Altogether it's a remarkably slick little production, with production skills ranging from Sidney Sheldon's original story to Seitz's stylized camerawork.

There's some interesting off-beat casting too, with Kosciov likeable for once, Basserman fresh from his role as the troubled, kidnapped diplomat in "Foreign Correspondent" - switching sides to play a Nazi bigwig, and Walter Kingsford turning up, as in the co-feature too, as the urbane master spy, probably quite a shock at the time when most audiences identified him as the kindly Dr. Carew of the Kildare films. To make sure that you really get your money's worth, Paramount even throw in some "Kiss the Boys Goodbye" music over the End and cast titles!

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

MY FAVORITE BLONDE (Paramount, 1942) Directed by Sidney Lanfield; Assoc. Producer, Paul Jones; Screenplay by Don Hartman and Frank Butler from an original story by Melvin Frank and Norman Panama; Camera, William Malle; 78 mins.

With Bob Hope (Larry Haines); Madeline Carroll (Karen Bentley); Gale Sondergaard (Stephanie Runick); George Zucco (Dr. Hugo Stenger);
Victor Varconi (Miller); Lionel Royce (Karl); Crane Whittle (Ulrich); Otto Reichow (Lans); Charles Cain (Turf O'Flaherty); Walter Kingsford (Dr. Faber); Erville Alderson (Sheriff); Harry Hollingsworth (Irish cop); James Burke and Edward Gargan (fighting Irishmen); Stage Door Man (Dick Elliott); Dooley Wilson ( Porter); Esther Howard (Mrs. Topley); Leslie Denison (Elvan); Vernon Dent (bartender); Robert Emmet Keane (agent); Isabel Randolph (mother); Carl Switzer (Conceited child); Milton Parsons (Delicious); Edward Woods (Truman); British agent (Leland Hedgson); Train attendant (Edward Hardway); Wade Boteler (Conductor); Tom Padden (Tom Douglas); Fred Kelsey, Edgar Dearing (radio patrol cops); Lloyd Whitlock (hotel manager); Addison Richards (Government agent); Matthew Boulton (Colonel Ashment); William Forrest (Air Force officer); Eddie Dew (airman); Bing Crosby (bystander).

1942 probably represented the very peak of Hope's career, with the release of two of his best films (this one and "Road to Morocco") and one of his biggest, "Louisiana Purchase". His comedies tend to survive in a rather unpredictable form; some are overlong, some very much tied into their period and so no longer really funny, but others, like this one and "The Ghost Breakers" - probably because they are stronger in story values and have the additional values of being parody - hold up extremely well. Far too many people remember the string of poor films with which Hope ended his movie career, and forget how good many of the earlier ones were.

Though only four minutes longer than its co-feature (making it a short "A" while that was a long B-plus programmer), "My Favorite Blonde" does rather dramatically illustrate the differences between A's and B's, particularly at Paramount. Both start off, Hitchcockian fashion, by playing the menace and mystery fairly straight. But in so doing, Hope's entrance is delayed in this case, and he and his fans have to be catered to. While the plot still continues to move fairly swiftly, the first half is mainly a matter of sequences to exploit Hope's pater and pantomime. The pointless episode on the train where he is menaced by unsmile, unsnapping villains is typical. The critical dagger-in-the-spy's back episode is delayed until the mid-way point, and it is only then that the "39 Steps" framework really takes over, and the various set-pieces begin. These include a funny episode with Hope forced to masquerade as a baby doctor lecturing to a woman's club, a sequence clearly parallel to Robert Donat's forced masquerade as a political speaker in the earlier Hitchcock film. The sequence with the amiable stereotyped Irish picnickers really belongs in a Preston Sturges film, where it would have been funnier, and its main purpose is as a segue from the city to the country location. On the whole though it is all too brisk and snappy to really pall, and remains one of Hope's best films.

The Hitchcockian relationship is of course stressed by having Madeleine Carroll, from "The 39 Steps", repeat as the heroine though in a total role reversal. Both of tonight's films fall back on the rather flimsy (and typically Hitchcockian) gimmick of having to get information across country, and/or suppress it. Such machinations always seem a little absurd when a telephone call would usually do the trick - as it certainly would here - and the script satirizes that too, having Carroll explain why a telephone call wouldn't work, although her explanation doesn't make much sense. The villains, particularly urbane George Zucco and of course Gale Sondergaard, are fun to watch, but in a Hope film they are merely foils, and don't get nearly as much chance to shine as Basserman and Kingsford in "Fly By Night". Crosby's gag appearance was very much of a novelty (though not for long) in 1942, and it still works as an amusing bit of business, even though the novelty is no longer there.

The film was so popular in 1942 that KBO Radio rushed through an imitation with "My Favorite Spy" for release a couple of months later. Hope himself repeated the formula the next year in "They Got Me Covered", and also re-used the "My Favorite Spy" title for himself, as well as "My Favorite Brunette". But "Blonde" remains the prototype and the best - and of course the most Hitchcockian.

These are the kinds of films that are extremely hard to come by these days, and the prints are quite old. However, they are fully complete and in good shape, some annoying scratches at the beginning of the Bob Hope film happily disappearing very quickly. By the way, the brief 78-minute running time may have been the result of deliberate pruning to create an almost non-stop pace. Matthew Boulton is in the cast, for example, as the major British agent, but appears only briefly, for a second or two, as a trussed up captive!

William E. Everson
Program ends 10:22.
Discussion session follows.