A Program of Restrained Halloween Horror

BETMIGHED (MG M, 1945) Direction, Screenplay and Original story by Arch Oboler; Produced by Jerome Bruner; Camera, Charles Serlano; Music, Bronislau Kaper. 65 mins.

NY premiere, August 1945 at the Criterion Theatre.

With Phyllis Thaxter (Joan Ellis); Edmund Gwenn (Dr. Bergson); Hank Davelis (Bob Arnold); Addison Richards (John Ellis); Kathleen Lockhart (Mrs Ellis); Horace (Stephen) McNally (Eric Russell); Francis Pierlot (Dr. Wilton); Sharon McNamara (Small girl); Gladys Blake (Glenda); William Wright (Mr. Herkheimer); Oscar O'Shea (Captain O'Malley); Minor Watson (Governor); Virginia Brissac (Governor's wife) and the voice of Audrey Totter as Joan's other self.

Although interesting as a forerunner of "The Three Faces of Eve" and other psychiatric films dealing with split personalities, "Bemighed" is mainly notable as the directorial debut of Arch Oboler, a radio contemporary of Orson Welles, who clearly hoped to cut a similar Wellesian swath in movies. He never quite made it, and "Bemighed," an intelligent and off-beat film, remained his best, to be followed by infrequent but interesting stunt or exploitation films like "Five," "Bwana Devil" and "The Wall." The first half of "Bemighed" is often quite rich visually, but thereafter Oboler's radio background takes over rather more, and sound track becomes more important than image. The casting of Edmund Gwenn as the evil psychiatrist is a novel touch; in an MGM film, one would have expected a character like Lionel Barrymore, Lewis Stone or Leon Ames to have been selected. As in the co-feature, the visual horror elements are probably deliberately played down, but it remains an absorbing and suspenseful film, one that created a minor stir at the time and now seems all but forgotten.

Pressure of work this week prevented the usual pre-annotating re-screening of the films to identify bit and small-part players. Apologies — and keep these notebooks at the ready!

— TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION —

THE MAN IN HALF MOON STREET (Paramount, 1944, rel. 1945) Directed by Ralph Murphy; Screenplay by Charles Kenyon from an original story by Barre Lyndon; Camera, Henry Sharp; Music by Miklos Rozsa; NY premiere January 1945, Rialto Theatre.

With Nils Asther (Julian Karel); Helen Walker (Eve Brandon); Reinhold Schmuzer (Dr. Kurt von Bruken); Paul Cavanagh (Dr. Henry Letimer); Edmund Breon (Sir Humphrey Brandon); Morton Lowery (Allen Guthrie); Matthew Boulton (Inspector Garth); Branden Hurst (Simpon, the butler) and Antina Dyne, Konstantin Shayne, Arthur Mulliner, Eder Fielding, Reginald Sheffield, Gustace Wyatt, Forrester Harvey.

As a 1944 production, "The Man in Half Moon Street" is far removed in time from the quartet of tangential horror films that Paramount made in 1940-41 as their contribution to the renewed cycle. Directed by Ralph Murphy, an interesting and unpredictable film-maker (we'll be showing two of his early 30's films in the Spring) but certainly no specialist in this field, it must be the coldest and most literate thriller of its type ever made. (A later remake, "The Man Who Could Cheat Death", done by Hammer in 1959, was far more generous with its blood!)

Although based on a well-known play, at first glance it would seem to be Paramount's answer to "The Picture of Dorian Gray" - and the Norton Lowery playing the same role, virtually, in both films aimed that it preceded it by a release by some months. Possibly someone at Paramount expected MGM's version of the Oscar Wilde story to be a much bigger hit than it proved to be, and decided to jump the gun on them. Strangely, it is handled like the play it originated was, most of the story conveyed by dialogue in interior sets, with visual horror downplayed. It is literate, well-acted, intelligently cast and handsomely mounted, but does lack the passion and excitement that one expects from the many Evelyn and Hyde variations. It is not exactly the decision to minimise traditional horror was done with the British market in mind. "With its locale and theme, the film would have been a useful one for Britain, and did indeed do quite well there with a London first-run and good circuit bookings. But in post-1942 wartime Britain, all horror films were automatically banned (for release at the rate of one a month after the war) or severely cut. Paramount obviously didn't want either to happen, so played it safe. It's not necessarily a wrong decision, and today especially it's a pleasure to see a nominal horror film where plot and characterisation take precedence over gore. It's especially good to see that fine old German actor (and director) Reinhold Schmuzer in his biggest Hollywood role. There are some unequaled moments of suspense and muted terror, and Asther's makeup techniques, with his particular sequence, seem to derive from those used in the 1922 "Dr. Jekyll and Hyde." And once in a while, a typical horror-genre line - "We are no longer scientists, now we are murderers!" or "What is one life to science - or a dozen?" — arrives to delight us. The most curious aspect of the film is its obviously deliberate sense of period. It starts out with a society party in which the stuffy audience is that of the 1880's. Only gradually does the Victorian impression disappear and incongruities appear - electric lights, a modern auto on cobbled streets, the heroine's suddenly up-to-date, good-looking, actually ninety though supposedly 25 (Asther doesn't quite pull it off!) talks knowingly of events that would make him more than virtual. Yet, when anyone writes a letter or a note in a machine, only the day and month are given, never the year. Clues eventually point to it all as taking place in the pre-war 30's, but even this is never very explicit. Despite being slow, it's an interesting and entertaining film; the only major pity is that it wasn't made a couple of years earlier when Robert Siodmak might have been assigned to it and brought some appropriate Germanic visual style to it. But it's rarely shown these days even on tv, and is well worth revising today, undoubtedly the most sedate and bloodless horror film you'll see this Halloween!

— over —
THE GLASS EYE (from the "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" series.)

Directed by Robert Stevens; Screenplay by Stirling Silliphant from a story by John Hac Cross; Camera, John Russell; Associate Producer, Joan Harrison; 22 mins.


We don't normally play TV films here; I think this may well be the first, though if the subject matter or director are interesting we certainly have no objections, and there's an especially good Robert Florey-directed ghost story that we're holding in the wings for the right moment. This mid-50's Hitchcock half-hour seemed such an appropriate way to wind up this particular program - it's like a segment from the British "Dead of Night", though minus a supernatural angle - that we had no qualms about presenting it. We're running it last partly because it makes such a nice, fast-paced climax to the evening, but also so that those who watch TV far more than I do, and may be familiar with it, have the opportunity to catch an earlier bus or train if they so wish.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:52.

No discussion tonight; there will be one next week, when we will of course be back at our regular screening grounds.

Next week - Nov.2 - also sees the last of the season's Jazz Concerts preceding our screening. Of late, these have not occasioned any delays, but the auditorium won't be open until about 7:20.

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Some post-script notes to "The Man in Half-Moon Street":

Miklos Rozsa's score seems oddly in conflict with what is going on; one of his recurring "menace" themes is lifted bodily from "The Thief of Bagdad", and reminds us too readily of the genie and the giant spider.

The opening of the film creates the doom-laden feeling of contemporary noir films by having one of the lesser characters intone in retrospect about a man who has clearly just died, and whose story we are about to hear. And finally, in the last scene, the mellow off-screen voice of Irving Pichel provides a Val Lewton-like summing up of it all.

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