TO CHEAT OR NOT TO CHEAT? TWO MYSTERY/SUSPENSE THRILLERS

THE WOMAN WHO CAME BACK (Republic, 1945) Directed and associate-produced by Walter Colmes; Screenplay by Dennis Cooper and Les Willis from an original story by John Kafka; Camera, Henry Sharp. 88 minutes.


SO LONG AT THE FAIR (Gainsborough-General Film Distributors, 1950) Directed by Anthony Darnborough and Terence Fisher; produced by Betty Box; Screenplay by Hugh Mills and Anthony Thorne from a novel by Thorne; Camera, Reginald Wyer; music composed and directed by Benjamin Frankel; US release in 1951 by Eagle-Lion; 96 mins.

With Jean Simmons (Vicky Barton); Dirk Bogarde (George Hathaway); David Tomlinson (John Barton); Honor Blackman (Rhoda); Cathleen Nesbitt (Mrs. Herve); Felix Aylmer (Consul); Betty Warren (Mrs O'Donovan); Marcel Ponsin (Mardisse); Austin Trevor (Commissioner of Police); Andre Morell (Dr. Hart); Zena Marshall (Mina); and Eugene Deckers, Natasha Sokolova, Nelly Arno.

I must apologise for these notes being rather brief; they are being written some two weeks in advance (along with the notes for program #9) because of pressure of time due to a quick trip to Italy. However, there'll be time to take up the slack in the introduction and question period. I also do not have the full cast of "The Woman Who Came Back" to hand at the moment (and in the wee hours of the morning) but they will be available at the show itself.

Both films, though very different in plot and treatment, are suspense mysteries depending on a surprise denouement (which limits what I can say about them anyway) "The Woman Who Came Back", like "Two Sinners" of two weeks back, is a Republic film and again a credit to a small company. It has a Carl Dreyer-like atmosphere in its manœuvre tale of witches (or possible witches) in contemporary New England. Obviously inspired by the then-current underplayed horror films of Val Lewton at MGM, it is restrained, basically intelligent and often quite chilling. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to realise how good it was, and how let-down audiences would be by the ending, which explains on a general level but ignores the evidence of all the details. Perhaps at the time this was less serious; it was after all just a "B" and the success of "The Woman in the Window" (and many imitators) suggested that if dream endings were acceptable there, then the ending of this film (not a dream solution, I hasten to add) would work just as well. It's a pity that somebody didn't realise halfway through production what a good little film they had, and add a little more care via re-writing and perhaps expanding the film by a few minutes to cover all the loose ends. Then we might have had a minor classic. But as we've often said about "B" films, it's all too easy to complain that they lack the subtlety and style of an "A", when we should be applauding the effort that made the "B" we're looking at so much of a bonus offering in many ways. In any case, forewarned you may be little inclined to quibble too much about the ending. Certainly its photography (by a top silent-period cinematographer) is very stylish, the editing is often effectively unconventional, and the acting well above normal "B" levels.

In contrast, "So Long at the Fair" is subtle (starting with its title, which is derived from an old nursery rhyme and relates to the plot) and doesn't cheat in any way. It's a mystery which really baffles, and manages to do so without apparent crime or criminal. If you haven't seen it, then the plot should be kept secret and I won't discuss it in detail, other than to say that, with minor modifications, it is based on fact and has provided the basis for many subsequent novels (especially "The Wheel Spins", which became "The Lady Vanishes" on screen) and "Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back". An elegant period piece, it moves leisurely, but constantly holds interest - and the final denouement is eminently satisfying.

Program ends approx. 10.24. Discussion/Question -- William K. Everson -- Session follows.

A postscript to "The Woman Who Came Back": it is so well directed that one wonders why routine director Colmes never again (or earlier) made anything nearly as good, and whether perhaps he had a little uncredited help on this one.