TWO DOOMED ROMANCES: BRITAIN AND FRANCE

I MET A MURDERER (Gamma Productions, 1939) Directed by Roy Kellino; Produced by Ray and Pamela Kellino and James Mason; Story and script, Mason and Pamela Kellino; Camera, Roy Kellino and Oswald Morris. Released (U.K.) by Grand National, later reissued by Exclusive; US premiere, 55th St. Cinema, Sept. '39; Music, Eric Ansell; app. 70 mins.
With: James Mason (Mark); Pamela Kellino (Jo); Sylvia Celere (Mark's wife); William Devlin (Mark's brother-in-law); Peter Coke (a horseman); Esma Cannon (a hiker); Sheila Morgan (her friend); James Harcourt (cart driver).

"I Met a Murderer" is historically notable on two counts. Firstly, it is one of the very first British film noirs (unlike American noir, it had a very definite beginning period) although its noir characteristics are thematic rather than stylistic. Secondly, it is a rare example of a personal, independent British production -- something like (though I think superior to) the earlier American Cassavetes movies. This was an area that was very difficult to break into British film without money, studio space and guaranteed eventual distribution and exhibition. cameraman Kellino, his actress wife and actor James Mason had all had variable but never notable success during the thirties; all loved film, and all felt that they were worthy of better things. The only way to achieve it was to make their own film, and on the proverbial shoestring. "I Met a Murderer" was shot entirely out of doors. There are no studio scenes at all, which certainly adds novelty and realism, but in a story of this type, can't provide the mood-evoking visuals that the story really needs. Much of it is virtually silent, with minimal dialogue post-synched, and perhaps a plethora of music to cover-up. Dramatically it is original and interesting (though hardly the Hitchcockian work that the NT Times suggested in its original review) though not always subtle. Mason's murder of "The German" (after he kills his dog) is, under the circumstances, perfectly justifiable -- but there's no enough build-up, a perfectly justifiable -- but there's no enough build-up, a fox-hunt with Mason on the run seems a little too obvious in its symbolism (Powell and Pressburger presented the same thought with more sophistication in "Gone To Earth") and the final armed posse of farmers in pursuit of Mason is not only extremely unlikely in England (especially since he posed no menace to them) but virtually impossible, since the un-armed police would scarcely have encountered their interference. These are all flaws that undoubtedly would have been attended to had there been more money and time. As it is, it is engrossing, owing far more to the French cinema (as was the pattern in British noir) than to the German (as was the case in American noir). Its initial impact in Britain was limited; critics liked it, but it was too hot a subject for those early days of the war, and distribution was limited. (Much was also made of difficulties created when pre-print material, probably a dupe negative, was lost at sea in a U-boat sinking, though this was probably exaggerated for publicity purposes). However, its very sparse audience when it was new made the film something of a bonanza a few years later when Mason became a major star, and the film fortuitously matched the mood of such later Mason films as "Odd Man Out" and "The Upturned Glass". When released, it was virtually a "new" film, played a big British circuit, and did well on revival in the States. It didn't really succeed in its object of launching Mason and the Kellinos as important new creative figures, but it didn't do them any harm either. The trio were also somewhat emotionally involved at the time, but Mason's having a major affair with Pamela Kellino (whom he subsequently married) seemed not to affect their civilized friendship or to intrude on professional camaraderie. But then Mason's always put first things first and clearly "I Met a Murderer" came first here.

-- 10 minute intermission --

LES AMANTS DU TAGE (U.S. title "Lovers' Net") (France,1954; US release 1957)
Directed by Henri Verneuil; Produced by Jacques Gautrier; scenario by J. Campanez and Maurice Rivet from a novel by Joseph Kessel; Camera, Roger Hubert; Music, Lucien Legrand; US premiere, Little Carnegie Theatre, July '57. 118 mins.
With: Daniel Gelin (Pierre); Françoise Arnoul (Kathleen Diner); Trevor Howard (Insp. Lewis); Marcel Dalio (Forfiri); Amalia Rodriguez (Amalia); Ginette Le Clerc (Maria); Betty Stockfield (Maise). French dialogue; English subtitles.

Although probably the best film of its workhouse director Verneuil (always reliable, never inspired) "Les Amants du Tage" is no classic. But it is a thoroughly representative illustration of the commercial French film that achieved art-house status over here; sexy enough to have a big edge Hollywood product, and sufficiently uncompromising (despite a novelletish plot) to seem more honest, more of an "art" picture than the average American film -- even though, at home, it was purely a formula doomed-romance, reminiscent of so many pre-war French movies with Gabin. But it hasn't been seen here for some thirty years, and it's rather nice to welcome again such a typical old friend -- particularly including Ginette Le Clerc and Betty Stockfield, playing the roles they always played there before. Françoise Arnoul, who never achieved the major stardom she should have, mainly because of the omnipotence of Brasseur, reminds us of how good she could be (although not ideally cast as a titled English lady). But the real hit of the show is Trevor Howard as a Scotland Yard man speaking appalling French as 90% of the French-speaking English do, partly because while they are speaking they have to remember and struggle with the illogical grammar of the French, but mainly because they go through life with the belief that they shouldn't have to speak any language but their own, and that it's up to the foreigners to learn English. In any event, Howard is a delight in one of his least familiar roles.

Program Ends Approx. 10.55.
No discussion this evening.