Two by Vera Caspary: Murder and Suspense

PRIVATE SCANDAL (Paramount, 1934) Directed by Ralph Murphy; Screenplay by Garrett Fort from an original story by Vera Caspary and Bruce Manners; Camera, Milton Krasner; 62 mins. NY premiere, Mayfair Theatre. With: Phillips Holmes (Cliff Barry); Ned Sparks (Riordan); Mary Brian (Fran Somers); Zasu Pitts (Miss Coates); Lew Cody (B. J. Somers); June Brewster (Adale Smith); Harold Walridge (Jerome); Jed Prouty (H. R. Robbins); Charles Sallen (Terwilliger); Rolfe Lloyd (Insurance agent); Olive Tell (Deborah Lane)

For those of you who like neatness and methodical programming, it might be worth noting that this film opened in NY the same week as last week's film "The Life of Vergie Winters", and that we started this series with a little-known Ralph Murphy film ("Golden Harvest") and we're winding up the same way. Oddly enough, we first regarded "Private Scandal" as a kind of "convenience". We wanted a short but snappy and appropriate film to go with "Bedelia", which is well worth playing but is a bit slow and talky. Then along came "Private Scandal" which seemed to fit right in and provide the necessary link; both films were written by Vera Caspary. (Actually, it was co-written by Bruce Manners, then an interesting mystery writer. It appears to be his first screen credit. Later of course he became a prominent writer and producer at Universal, working on many of the Deanna Durbin movies). However, in the meantime, "Private Scandal" was shown at a film convention in Syracuse, and proved to be one of the hits of the weekend. Somehow it came to life with an audience, and much of it was drowned out with laughter -- by delegates from all over the country, not just by the local Syracuse lads who probably need a good laugh. Whether that experience will be repeated tonight remains to be seen; audience mood has a lot to do with whether a film works or not. Be that as it may, it's a most entertaining film, although the opening reel is so good that it never quite maintains that momentum. Moreover, Lew Cody as the murder or suicide victim gives such a good performance, and is generally such a likeable character, that his removal lessens one's interest in the plot. On the other hand, his death introduces detective Ned Sparks in one of his best and largest roles, with some excellent dialogue. By rights Sparks should have had star billing; actually nobody is starred, but inexplicably Zasu Pitts gets top billing in the under-the-title credits.

10 minute intermission

BEDELIA (Rank-General Film Distributors, 1946) Directed by Lance Comfort; A John Fordfield Production; produced by Isadore Goldsmith; Screenplay by Vera Caspary, Isadore Goldsmith, Herbert Victor, Moe Charles and Roy Ridley from the novel by Caspary; Camera, Freddie Young; 90 mins. With: Margaret Lockwood (Bedelia Carrington); Ian Hunter (Charles Carrington); Barry K. Barnes (Ben Chaney); Anne Crawford (Ellen Walker); Jill Esmond (Nurse Harris); Barbara Blair (Sylvia Johnstone); Ellen Pollock (Housekeeper); Louise Hampton (Hannah); Julian Mitchell (Dr. Mabuse); Kynaston Reeves (Mr. Bennett); Beatrice Varley (Navy); Olga Lindo (Mrs. Bennett); John Savew (Joe Johnstone); Marcel Pongon (Michael) and Claude Bailey, Paul Bonifas, Martin Harvey, Sonia Srgyl, Aubrey Malallieu, David Keir, Dermot Walsh, Al Gold, Lore Cordell, Madeline Thomas, Yvonne Andre, John Allen.

Although a fairly ordinary (if very enjoyable) film today, "Bedelia" in 1945 was clearly meant to be the kind of filmic offering that no moviegoer could refuse. The title plus Caspary's name implied a follow-up to "Laura", an angle made much of in the advertising. Further, it came immediately after Lockwood's biggest hit to date, "Wicked Lady", and gave her another "evil woman" role to cash in on that. It was a big hit in England, and almost equally so here, where it got excellent playing time. In Britain it was given a full-scale reissue only four years later. After the nobility of her character in last week's "Love Story", Lockwood is here playing the feminine equivalent of the Rathbone-Boyer-Cotten wife murdering husbands. Spouse-disposal seems to be a major industry in British mystery novels and films, and to a certain extent in every-day life too. There's not much subtlety in "Bedelia" and not too much mystery, but there's a certain amount of suspense and some good performances. In came in the midst of a spate of really top-grade British films and cashed in on their momentum, even though reviews were so-so. It's set in a pre-war period, presumably because the European high-life that is background to much of the tale just didn't exist in the immediate post-war period. Although released by Rank, it was actually an independent production and quite a good looking one, considering the modest production facilities available. (Incidentally, producer Goldsmith and novelist Caspary also teamed up for the interesting Hollywood film "Three Husbands" later on). In the U.S. the film ran foul of the Production Code which wouldn't allow the ending and insisted on a more lawful one; our print tonight is of the original British version. Its biggest mystery is why Caspary needed FOUR co-writers to adapt her story.

Program Edit: 10:22 Discussion/Questions follow — WR. E. Eversen