THREE CRIME "B" MOVIES: A COMPARISON IN STUDIO STYLES
(And all three premiered in Times Square!)

LEGION OF TERROR (Columbia, 1936) Directed by C.C. Coleman; Original story and screenplay by Bert Granet; Camera, George Mechean. NY premiere: Globe Theatre. 62 mins
With: Bruce Cabot (Frank Marshall); Margaret Churchill (Nancy Foster); Crawford Weafer (Sam Hawitt); Ward Bond (Don Foster); Charles Wilson (McCullum); John Hamilton (Chamblin); Arthur Leon Gardner; Nicholas Celpeland (Lefty); John Tyrrell (Feeney); Edward Le Saint (Sweedon)

"B" movies are very much an endangered species these days, too short and unimportant to get much television exposure, and decidedly low on the tune pile when it comes to archival and preservation work. We try to show some of them as often as we legitimately can; some because they have genuine, even outstanding merit; others, like tonight's trio, because the very fact that they were lost to film history and all hope of rescuing them came from three different studios, and illustrate differing media operandi. It's also interesting to note that there was a very real market for these films: all of tonight's films had NY first-runs, as opposed to films like John Ford's "Hangman's House" or our recently shown "A Village Tale", which did not.

There was a definite class distinction at work in Columbia's "B"s; these that had an extra five minutes' running time or a star like Richard Dix or Lew Ayres had just a little more money allocated to them and came out looking quite respectable. But their run-of-the-mill "B"s had a hard time look to them; writing lacked polish, the stars often were their own clothes (and Bruce Cabot was definitely no Adolphe Menjou in that department); logic was never a strongpoint, and sets and production values were marginal. However, even in this kind of film there were selling angles, and enough good action or shock scenes to p.p.p up the pester and produce a lively trailer. "Legion of Terror" was designed to cash in on all of the publicity attendant on Warmer's making of "Black Legion", and get to the screen first. It did -- and if it shows it, well its economies seemed justified by its time. Columbia's other two had to sit for a while to get into all typewards, and audiences knew exactly who and what everybody was: anybody who trusted Charles Wilson in any Columbia film (he was their perennial "hidden" villain, and everybody knew from chapter one of 'The Spider's Web' that he would turn out to be "The Octopus" in the final chapter!) deserved no sympathy whatever.

FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION

BULLETS FOR O'HARA (Warner Bros-First National, 1942) Directed by William K. Howard;
Screenplay by Raymond Schrock from an original story "Fat and Mike" by Richard Connell);
Camera, Ted McCord; NY premiere, Globe Theatre, July '42: 50 mins.
With: Regr Pryer (Mike O'Hara); Jean Perry (Patricia Van Dyne); Anthony Quinn (Tony Van Dyne); Maris Wicks (Elaine Standish); Dick Purcell (Wedge); Robert Bowerth (Minister); Richard Alenley (McKay Standish); Dewolf Hopper (Palmer); Joan Winfield (Marjorie Palmer); Roland Drew (Bradford); Joseph King (Maxwell); Victor Zimmerman (Steve); Hank Mann (Schwartzman); Kenneth Harlan (Jim); Frank Wave (Wedgek); Jack Mauer (G-Man); Sidney Bracey (Lamens); Leah Baird (Felice matren)

It's exactly 50 years to the month since this little item raced at top speed over the Globe screen. If Warner's "B"s had a consistent failing, it was that they all tried to look like "A"s -- same plots, same production values, same pacing. But they often moved so fast that it was difficult to keep up with them, and one could be swamped with snazzy editing and ever-scored music. Since some of these, like this one, ran a scant 50 minutes, one had to rely on the story, the economy genre, the action, and the lopsidedness of the cast to keep their own Capney (and other) gangster movies, lifting all the action highlights as well as linking and establishing shots, ingeniously matching up sets and costumes and adding lines to explain why the cars seemed so out of date! This one is a cunningly contrived remake of 1926's "Public Enemy's Wife" (already only a programmer, but some 15 minutes longer than tonight's remake) with Pryor, Perry and Quinn in the key roles originally played by Pat O'Brien, Margaret Lindsay and Cesar Romero. You'll probably spot them in some of the better looking of the "B"s but there's no issue there, though Dick Purcell, Kenneth Harlan and Joseph King appeared in both pictures/forester melodrama/"o'case it rocks it all over at a tremendous speed, not only retaining all of the original plot and action, but adding some new stuff of his own! If you're going to make a slick economy-conscious "B", this is the way to do it!

FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION

ILLEGAL TRAFFIC (Paramount, 1938) Directed by Lewis King; Associate Producer, William C. Thomas;
Screenplay by Robert Yost, Lewis Foster, Stuart Anthony; Camera, Henry Sharp. 67 mins.
NY premiere: Criterion Theatre.
With: J. Carroll Naish (Lewis Zomar); Mary Carlisle (Carol Butler); Robert Preston (Rent Martin); Judith Barrett (Marie); Larry Crabbe (Steve); Pierre Watkin (Jagger); George McKay (Old Man Butler); Richard Denning (Silk Patterson); Philip Warren (Dimar); Morgan Conway (Ryan); Archie Twitchell (Duke); Monte Blue (Police Chief Moran); Sheila Darcy (Mathilde); Dennis Morgan (Cagey Miller); Decores Casey (Mamie); John Hart (Davis); Regis Toomey (Wimpy); William B. Davidson (Dalton); Joseph Crehan (Chief Daly)

Too little space left to explain why Paramount made the best "B" thrillers of all; lack of uniformity, top casts, excellent directors and cameramen (Robert Flaherty did some genuine classics in this field) and the fact that most of Paramount's Bs were individual films, not part of a formulated series, and very flexible in length. "Illegal Traffic", admittedlly not top echelon, has an unusual plot, a great cast and enough action to keep it going. What it lacks is a director to control Naish's extraordinary Italian/Czech accent (according to Donald Baur)...

Program Ends 10:40