Two British thrillers - an "A" and a "B" - from 1952

The Ghost Ship (Anglo-Amalgamated, 1952) Written, produced and directed by Vernon Sewell. Camera, Stanley Grant; 74 mins. Witi: Dermot Welsh (Guy); Hazel Court (Margaret); Hugh Burden (Dr. Fawcett); John Robinson (Dr. Martineau); Hugh Latimer (Peter); Patricia Owens (Joyce); Joan Carol (Mrs. Martinez); Joss Ambler (Manager); Mignon O'Doherty (Mrs. Manley); and Melissa Stribling, Laidman Browne, John-King Kelly, Colin Douglas, Jack Stewart, Anthony Marlowe, Pat McGrath, Geoffrey Dunn, Ian Carmichael, Anthony Hayes, Barry Phelps, Robert Moore, Ewen Salom, Jack Finlay, Gordon Bell, Madeline Thomas, Graham Stuart.

Tonight's combination offers two British films, one a decided "A" and the other an enterprises and above-average "B" from a much smaller independent company, not only both from the same year, but also both released in October. "The Ghost Ship" used to be very unfairly handicapped; it was always turning up when one expected or hoped for the then unavailable (and obviously better) Val Lewton film of the same title. Now that the Lewton film is available, albeit in a limited way, this British "Ghost Ship" can be regarded on its own merits, and not as a source of frustration. Vernon Sewell, who directed, was literally Britain's own Edgar Ulmer; frequently handled routine material, rarely given a decent budget, he invariably managed to make something interesting out of the proverbial sword's ear. His craftsmanship is attested to by the fact that Powell and Pressburger often used him as a second unit director, and entrusted him with the sole direction of their production "The Silver Fleet". Sewell had a fondness for the macabre, and particularly for the particular story that he tells here. He told it first, in his very first film, 1934's "The Medium". He remade it, on a bigger scale, as "Latin Quarter" in 1945 (released here as "Frenzy"), and shown in an earlier New School series and echoes appeared ever after. This is virtually the same story, but filmed aboard Sewell's own small yacht, cutting down production costs considerably. A serious ghost story, concerned with creating unease rather than terror, it is a mostly made little film, and despite its economy, well crafted and a testimony to ingenuity. The cast (a surprisingly big one for a film that is so limited in scope, and rarely seems to have more than a very few people on screen at one time) contains, as always with "B" product, interesting newcomers on the way up, and stars of some stature on the way down. The three basic stars were (comparative) top-liners for the Rank studios only a few years earlier. We'll say a little more about British "B"s and about Sewell in our opening comments. (Anglo-Amalgamated later made Michael Powell's "Peeping Tom".

-- Ten Minute Interval --

The Venetian Bird (U.S. title "The Assassin") (British Film Makers-General Film Distributors, 1952) Directed by Ralph Thomas; produced by Betty Box Screenplay by Victor Canning from his novel; Camera, Ernest Steward; 95 mins. NY premiere, Sutton Theatre. With: Richard Todd (Eduard Mercere); Eva Bartok (Adriana Madova); John Gregson (Cassano); George Colouris (Spadoni); Margaret Graham (Rosa); Walter Rilla (Count Boria); John Bailey (Lis Longo); Sydney James (Pernardo); Martin Bodey (Gufo); Michael Balfour (Morella); Sydney Taffler (Boldsca); Miles Malleson (Crespi); Eric Pohlmans (Gostlin) and David Hurst, Raymond Young, Ferdy Payne, Jack Clifford, Eileen Way, Tony Lucard, Janice Kane, Meier Tzelniker.

In 1952 Richard Todd's career as Britain's brightest new male star (since 1948) was just about at its peak; in a year or two he would retreat to a position of being reliable and useful but no longer major. While at his peak it made good sense to put him into the kind of sure fire role that had helped confirm Robert Donat's popularity in "The 39 Steps", and also into the kind of location-filmed chase thriller that "The Third Man" had made fashionable. From these hints it will be seen that "The Venetian Bird" is, if not original then certainly derivative. The 6th film of a newish director, Ralph Thomas (who had just made the Hitchcockian "The Clouded Yellow"), it moves briskly but rather broadly. There is little subtlety to it, and it's no surprise that Thomas' greatest commercial success came later in comedies, and especially the "Carry On" series. However, it's an enjoyable example of its species. Today it would be done in color (which wouldn't hurt) and with much more violence (which would).As it is, the Venice locations are well utilised, especially in the chase climax, and the cast is full of interesting character players, many of them so essentially British that their desperation in trying to sound Italian is occasionally amusing. (Dear old Miles Malleson exclaiming "Mama Mia!" is typical). Like so many British films of the fifties, it seems to have disappeared, even from television, and certainly deserves a chance to be seen again.

-- William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10.30. Discussion session follows.