TWO OFF-BEAT CRIME/SUSPENSE MELODRAMAS

DANGEROUS TO KNOW (Paramount, 1938) Directed by Robert Florey; Produced by Edward T. Lowe; Screenplay by William Lipman and Horace McCoy from the play "On The Spot" by Edgar Wallace; Camera, Theodor Sparkuhl; Music, Boris Morros; 70 mins; NY premiere, Criterion, March '38. With: Adria Tumblr (Stephen Reck); Anna May Wong (Madam Lin Ying); Gal Patrick (Margaret Van Case); Lloyd Nolan (Inspector Brandon); Harvey Stephens (Philip Kasten); Anthony Quinn (Nicola Kusoff); Roscoe Karnes (Duncan); Porter Hall (Mayor Bradley); Barlowe Browland (Butler); Redd Hopper (Mrs Carson); Hugh Southern (Harvey Gregsson); Edward Pawley (John Rance).

"Dangerous to Know" is one of a small handful of Paramount Robert Floreys that we haven't yet played; actually it was tentatively scheduled a few years back, when its sudden and unexpected appearance on a Museum of Modern Art Paramount series caused us to delay it for a while. In a way it is untypical Florey except in its overall class and craftsmanship. Most of his Paramount underworld crime thrillers moved like lightning, jazzed up with dynamic cuts and lighting. By his normal standards, this is relatively slow, with only occasional moments of action or menace. Yet this is the kind of film he preferred to make instead of simple actioners, with a greater stress on characterization and motivation. Luckily, he made both kinds of movies. Modestly budgeted and made quickly, it benefits from being having to move quickly from one thrill to another, and the care that Florey was able to devote to acting and plot development makes it look far more expensive than it was, though that of course was always a Florey characteristic. In some ways it does not entirely work. Based on a 1931 Edgar Wallace novel and play, in which the lead was loosely based on Al Capone, it was a starring vehicle on the London stage for Charles Laughton; Anna May Wong also played her same role on the stage. There's a slight inconsistency in that the class conscious and racial elements would have been more meaningful in the story's original London setting; also being made at the height of Production Code restrictions meant that punches had to be pulled in spelling out particular points, though it is abundantly clear that Miss Wong is more than just a "hostess". It's a film that also bears a striking resemblance to another Florey-Tamiroff-Nolan film, "King of Gamblers" (1939), although the mood is quite different. As usual, and despite two top writers and a good original source, Florey added some writing of his own, and even contributed to the art direction. Much of the Oriental decor came from his own home, while the Napoleonic busts and props (borrowed from Florey's large Napoleonic collection) made the impression of Tamiroff with Napoleon obvious without it having to be spelled out. With its fine cast, careful production values and its dramatic climax, "Dangerous to Know" is one of the more interesting and unusual Floreys, with plenty of other ingredients to compensate for the thinning down of his usual fast-paced action.

— 10 MINUTE INTERMISSION —

TIME WITHOUT PITY (Eros-British, 1957) Directed by Joseph Losey; Produced by John Arnold, Anthony Simmons and Leon Clore; Screenplay by Ben Heiserman from a play by Enlyn Williams; Camera, Freddie Francis; Musical Director, Marcus Dods; 68 mins; NY premiere, 55th St. Playhouse.

With: Michael Redgrave (David Graham); Ann Todd (Honor Stanford); Leo McKern (Robert Stanford); Peter Cushing (Jeremy Clayton); Also McCowan (Alce Graham); Renee Houston (Mrs Barker); Lois Maxwell (Vicki Harker); Paul Daneman (Bryan Stanford); Joan Findlay (Agnes Cole); Richard Wordsworth (Maxwell); George Devine (Barnes); Eynest Clarke (Under Secretary); Peter Copley (Padre); Richard Leech (Expresso Bar proprietor); Hugh Moxey (Prison governor); Dickie Henderson (Comedian); and Julian Somers, John Chandos.

"Time Without Pity" was Joseph Losey's third British feature, and the first on which he was able to use his own name on the credits. It was an independent production, released through Eros - a company roughly (but literally) equivalent to Realart over here in that it had made a small fortune through the reissue of a block of Universal Pictures from the 30's and 40's, and from the proceeds were able to advance into both "A" and "B" production on their own. The major stars involved (and the cast is perhaps even more notable today than it was in 1957) helped establish Losey in Britain, and from then on his productions were made for major companies: Rank, Columbia, Paramount etc. Something of a film noir in terms of plot and characters, though not in style, it is an adaptation of an Enlyn Williams play and expanding it to increase the tension via superficial action scenes and cross-cutting between locations and characters has probably reduced the cohesion it had on stage, although it's perhaps the earliest example of the pretentious quality that would eventually seep into the basically straightforward narratives that Losey managed to turn into very personal films. It's a rescue an innocent man from the gallows theme, a familiar enough formula, and one well served by the cast here, but somehow Losey manages to suggest that there is actually secondary to that of the alienation of father and son, though never actually making up his mind on that point. In a way, it's a kind of "The Big Sleep" for intellectuals: after it's over, there are several plot holes (or at least major dents) and behavioural and motivational patterns that are never quite explained. But with that cast, the explanations, it's not too apparent while the film is in motion, and when it's over, the explanations don't seem to matter that much. Our third Losey in a very short period, "Time Without Pity" is certainly worth seeing again - or catching up on if you missed it before.

— William K. Everson —

Program Ends approx. 10.20.
I will be back for next week's wrap-up program and a discussion session. Fall program will be included in next week's notes.