THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 761: Program #5
October 21, 1944

Two wartime suspense thrillers

NIGHTMARE (Universal, 1942) Directed by Tim Whelan; Produced by Dwight Taylor; Screenplay by Philip MacDonald's story "Escape"; Camera, George Barnes; Music, Frank Skinner; 80 mins; NY premiere, Loew's St. With Diana Barrymore (Leslie Stafford); Brian Donlevy (Daniel Shane); Gavin Muir (Abbingdon); Henry Daniell (Capt. Stafford); Hans Conreid (Hans); Stanley Loga (Insp. Robbins); John Abbott (Capt. Clyde); Arthur Shields (Sergeant Eustace Wyatt (Angus); Ivan Simpson (Underground worker); Ian Wolfe (butler); Anita Bolster.

World War Two brought spy films back into vogue - they provided topicality without the grimness of orthodox war films - and 1942 provided no less than three cunning ripoffs of Hitchcock's "The 39 Steps" which producers smugly assumed audiences would have forgotten since its 1935 release. Two came from Paramount, "Fly By Night" and "My Favorite Blonde", and the third - tonight's "Nightmare" - was the most obvious, since it retained a British locale and the structure of the accidentally-involved hero dashing to and fro across England in his efforts to avoid both police and foreign agents and prove his innocence. Studios might have been correct after all in assuming audiences wouldn't remember the basic source, as quite certainly the critics didn't! Universal gave the film a big advertising push at the time, mainly as a means to sell its new star Diana Barrymore, and there were suggestions in many of the ads that it was a Hitchcockian thriller. The film did quite well, but reviews were generally on the negative side. Today, when it doesn't have to compete directly with such better wartime thrillers as Lang's "Manhunt" or Hitchcock's "Saboteur", it holds up rather nicely. It's exciting and fun, once one accepts that it's no more than program fare, and that if it hadn't been selected as a vehicle for Miss Barrymore, it might have wound up as a six-reel "S" with Don Terry and Elyse Knox. It certainly has its flaws, many of them probably attributable to the fact that screenwriter Dwight Taylor (with a history mainly of light musicals, although also including "W Weeke Up Screaming") was using the film as a vehicle to switch him to producer status. It didn't work, and he reverted to writing. His inexperience doesn't exactly show, but he clearly didn't get the most out of his budget, and an air of economy if not of cheapness prevails. The art direction tries hard to create a British wartime milieu, but the use of back projection - even of authentic English footage - is too obvious, as are Brian Donlevy's doubles. More could have been made of the interesting support characters too, especially Gavin Muir and Henry Daniell, who manages to make something two-dimensional out of a sketchily underwritten part. The music, surprisingly, is lifted out of the same year's "Saboteur"! Very much of an "A" on release, we're using "Nightmare" as the bottom half of the double-bill tonight, and in that slot it should still prove very enjoyable.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

DARK WATERS (United Artists, 1944) Directed by Andre de Toth; Produced by Benedict Bogeaus; Screenplay by Joan Harrison and Marian Cockrell from an original story by Frank and Marian Cockrell; Camera, Archie Stout, John Mescall; Musical Score, Miklos Rozsa; 90 mins; NY premiere, Globe Theatre. With: Merle Oberon (Leslie Calvin); Fanchon Tone (Dr. George Grover); Thomas Mitchell (Mr. Sidney); Fay Bainter (Aunt Emily); John Qualen (Uncle Norbett); Elisha Cook Jr. (Cleave); Rex Ingram (Pearson Jackson); Odette Kyrtil (Nana Boudreux); Eugene Bordon (Papa Boudreux); Eileen Coughlan (Jeanette); Nina Mae McKinney (Florela); Ilen Napper (Doctor); Rita Beery (Nurse).

Post-war Noirs were full of tormented heroes and heroines suffering from wartime neuroses. Here is possibly the first of the genre, made during the war (and mildly criticized as being too unsettling for the times). Film noir was not a descriptive term that came coined by 1944, and the film was usually reviewed as a thriller, or as by the author an all-out horror film. It was director de Toth's first foray into the noir field, and it's really our old friend "Gaslight" neatly brought up to date and played out in a creepy Louisiana bayou. Benedict Bogeaus, notorious for too often attempting ambitious films on meager budgets, here needs only atmosphere, not size, and gets it in full measure from a good cast, solid direction, an effectively neurotic score from Rozsa, and fine cinematography from a duo of top cameramen. One of the writers, Joan Harrison, was a former Hitchcock associate, and even the editor James Smith - was a veteran from D.W. Griffith! So the near-invincible hero should realize what is going on. But for surface thrill, it's a solid work and builds to an exciting and grim climax. It was one of UA's bigger successes that year, and in key theaters that they owned - such as the London Pavilion in Piccadilly Circus - it enjoyed long and profitable runs.

Program ends app. 10:40.

Short discussion session follows.