Two Off-Beat Crime Melodramas From the Late 'Thirties

I Am the Law (Columbia, 1938) Directed by Alexander Hall; Produced by Everett Riskin; Screenplay by Jo Swerling and (partially) Paul Jarrico, based on Fred Allhoff's Liberty Magazine story "Tracking New York's Crime Baron" in the series "In Camera," directed by Henry Freulich; Musical Director, Morris Stoloff. NY premiere, Capitol Theatre August '38. 80 mins.

With Edward G. Robinson (Professor Lindsay); Barbara O'Neill (Jery Lindsay); John Beal (Paul Ferguson); Wendy Barrie (Frankie Ballou); Otto Kruger (Gene Ferguson); Arthur Loft (Tom Ross); Marc Lawrence (Eddie Girard); Douglas Wood (Berry); Robert Middlemass (Koss Kitchell); Ivan Miller (Insp. Gleason); Charles Halton (Leander); Louis Jean Heydt (J. W. Butler); Joe Dowling (Bartender); Emory Parnell (Dr. Knox); Elise Martindale (Mabel MacMahon, Prisoner); Frederick Burton (Governor); Lucien Littlefield (Roberts); Ed Kean, Robert Cummings Harvey Clark, James Flavin, Ed Le Saint, Frank Mayo (witnesses); Kane Richmond, James Bush (students); Scott Colton, Gaylord Pendleton (law students); Bud Jamison (bartender); Iris Meredith (Girard's girl); Ada as Habeas, and George Turner, Lane Chandler, Joan Leslie, Lester Dorr, Anthony Merrill, Lee Shumway, Cyril Ring, Bess Flowers, Lloyd Whitlock.

While "Angels With Dirty Faces," released later in 1938, probably had the greatest influence on the reviving gangster cycle, the genre was alive and kicking much earlier in the year thanks to Hollywood's attempts to cash in on the racket-busting headlines of N.Y.'s district attorney, Thomas Dewey. "Smashing the Rackets" and "Racket Busters" (with Walter Abel as a thinly disguised Dewey) were released in the same month as "I Am the Law." While noting its occasional plot absurdities, the NY Times nevertheless regarded it as "the liveliest show in town." Columbia was always fond of mixing its crime melodrama with soap opera, via crime bosses (often, as here, Otto Kruger) who aren't all bad and complicated relationships. It was a formula that gave many of their films a "B" added distinction, and it works just as well in this day and age. It's a generalization to think of the film as a story involving Robinson as a law professor who decides to spend his sabatical cleaning up the rackets. (These sabbaticals have to be approved by committees hoping for theoretical works to be produced; it is doubtful that Robinson would get away with such cavalier activity today!) The film is funny, exciting and suspenseful and much better than one might expect from its minor reputation, a categorization that applies to many of Alexander Hall's charming and tasteful films. All the leading characters are well in evidence - including Byron Foulser (whom we committ above) in a particularly memorable role. While the film doesn't have quite the zip of Robinson's other two big 1938 hits, "The Amazing Dr. Clutterhouse" and "A Slight Case of Murder," it makes an amiable companion to them.

Ten Minute Intermission —

Invisible Stripes (Warner Bros., 1939) Directed by Lloyd Bacon; Dial. dir: Irving Rapper; Produced by Hal Wallis; Screenplay by Warren Duff and Jonathan Finn from the novel by Warden Lewis E. Laws; Camera, Ernie Haller; Special Effects, Byron Haskin; Musical directors, Leo Forstein and Heinz Roemheld. NY premiere, Strand Theatre, January 1940. 81 mins.

With: George Raft (Cliff Taylor); Jane Bryan (Peggy); William Holden (Tim Humphrey); Bogart (Chuck Martin); Flora Robson (Mrs Taylor); Paul Kelly (Ed Kruger); Lee Patrick (Nolly); Henry O'Neill (Masters); Frankie Thomas (Tommy); Moroni Olsen (Warren); Margot Stevenson (Sue); Marc Lawrence (Lefty); Johnny Mack Brown (Bartender); Bobrey (Tommy); William Hade (Shrank); Tully Marshall (Old Butler); Chester Clute (Mr. Bub); Public Moe (Moe); Frank Mayo (guards); Pat Collins (Alec); Bert Hanlon (Shorty); Joseph Crehan (Mr. Chasen); Victor Killian (foeman); Charles Wilson, Robert Elliott (detectives); Frank Faylen (Steve); Emory Parnell, Wade Boteler (cops); Marian Martin (Blonde); John Hamilton (Capt. Johnson); and John Ridgely, William Davidson, Irving Bacon, Dorothy Welber, J. Anthony Hughes, De Wolfe Hopper, Ralph Dunn, Al Hill, Pat O'驾车, Selmer Jackson, Lane Chandler, Pat Flaherty.

Considering its (by later standards) blockbuster cast, it's surprising that "Invisible Stripes" has remained relatively unexploited both in revival houses and on tv. It was Bogart's 7th 1939 film, and after straight villainy in most of them, it's pleasant to see that he is given the chance to inject likeable qualities into his gangster here. Stressing the machine-gun efficiency of "W" in those days, this was also one of six films that Lloyd Bacon directed in 1939; it went into production in late September, and was already on screens by the end of the year. Similar to Lang's "You Only Live Once," it is almost as loaded in the way the Fates line up against the hero - but by this time Warmers were more interested in cracking gangster action than social comment. Marc Lawrence ended up with his unpleasanties in "I Am the Law" earlier in the evening! Warden Laws must have almost rivaled Frank Follin and services writer in his prison books (and movies made from them) and crime certainly paid off well for him! A film that deserves to be better known than it is, "Invisible Stripes" is tight, well acted and directed, and a thoroughly enjoyable genre outing. ———— W.M.K. Eyverson.

Program ends at 11:00 p.m.