"LOVE FROM A STRANGER" (United Artists, 1937) Directed by Rowland V. Lee; screenplay by Frances Marion from a story by Agatha Christie and a play by Frank Vosper; Associate producer, Harry Edington; Music: Benjamin Britten; Camera: Philip Tannura; 8 reels With Basil Rathbone, Ann Harding, Binnie Hale, Bruce Seton, Jean Cadell, Bryan Powley, Joan Hickson, Donald Calthrop, Eugene Leathy.

Although nominally a British film, this original version of "Love From a Stranger" has a Hollywood director, scenarist, cameraman and stars. Director Lee and Basil Rathbone, who made four films together, were almost as felicitous a team as John Ford and John Wayne. Lee was especially adept at not only controlling Rathbone's tendency to overact but also (as here, and in "Son of Frankenstein") at exploiting it for scenes of nervous hysteria. "Love from a Stranger" is one of the best of that select theatrical group of wife-terrorism-thrillers. The term "Gaslight" is in a sense the prototype, even though not the first. Based on a play by Frank Vosper (who enacted the lead on the London stage, and himself disappeared mysteriously aboard ship, a presumed murder victim or a suicide), it is now basically familiar stuff, but is so tautly done and splendidly acted by its two stars, that it maintains suspense still. It is certainly far superior to the clodhopper American remake, which put it back into a heavy-handed period setting, and wrapped it all up with a fist-fight) and also to the more famous but over-rated Thorold Dickinson version "Gaslight". Perhaps because Ann Harding isn't the most gullible little wife that Diana Wynyard was. Rathbone is a stronger and more dramatic too. Rathbone too is exactly right all the way - debonair and charming at first, and suddenly, shockingly insane when one least expects it. There isn't too great an attempt to hide the stage origin, but the film moves constantly and at key moments there are bizarre camera angles which may be theatrical in themselves, but which work well in emphasizing the tension and hysteria.

"LA BETE HUMAINE" (France, 1936) Directed by Jean Renoir, adapted from the novel by Emile Zola; Camera: Curt Courant, assisted by Claude Renoir Jr., Alain Renoir, Pasqueux, Guy Ferrier, Natteau; Sets: Lourie; Music by Josef Kosma; English titles; 8 reels With Jean Gabin, Simone Simon, Fernand Ledoux, Cairet, Jean Renoir, Gerard Landry, Jenny Hella, Collette Regis, Claire Gerard.

Unseen in New York since 1950, "La Bete Humaine" is from Renoir's best period, surrounded by "La Grande Illusion", "La Regle du Jeu" and "Partie de Campagne". It could hardly be more typical of the grim, moody, defeatist sex dramas that so proliferated in France in the mid and late 30's, and which seemed so raw, "adult" and honest at the time due to a particularly barren, superficial and Production-Code harassed period in Hollywood at that time. Many of the French "classics" of those years, and especially "Quai des Brumes", today seem quite as contrived and false as their glossier Hollywood counterparts, but Renoir has survived far better than Duvivier or Carne. Despite seeming very restrained about a subject that would today be handled with no delicacy at all, and even with its then subtle and "poetic" but today almost hackneyed stormy sex symbolism, "La Bete Humaine" still has a certain raw power. It's a bit tardy in getting under way, and not all of the implications of the source novel (it's the third of the Zola trilogy that also encompassed "Nana" and "Gervaise"), but then Renoir was always a better director than scenarist; Extremely well received over here, with glowing NY Times and Herald Tribune reviews, it was soon of course being sold via the standard sex-exploitation route: The most delightful and oft-used catchline: "VIVID DRAMA OF CONSUMING PASSION ... HUMAN PERTEXTIONS ...

Our print, incidentally, is from England, and contains the original French ending, which was drastically re-shot for its US release. (I'll say more about that prior to the showing). Fritz Lang, who made a rather good Hollywood remake of Renoir's "La Chienne" in "Scarlet Street", later remade this one in the 50's as "Human Desire", with Glenn Ford, Gloria Grahame and Fred Crawford, but too literally type-cast. Comparisons here would be particularly unfortunate, though Lang - like Renoir - did work in some excellent documentary footage of trains. Otherwise, with Glenn Ford as a tempted but decidedly normal Korean war veteran, and a happy ending, it was enough to make Zola, Nana and Gervaise spin in their graves!"