Two Who Didn't Make It -- Raymond Griffith and Harry Langdon.

"The Sleeping Porch" (Christie Comedies, 1930) 2 reels; directed by A. Lesley Pearce; screenplay adaptation by Alfred A. John; starring Raymond Griffith with Barbara Leonard, John Litel, David Calila.

For years we've been hearing tales about Raymond Griffith's whisper of a voice, and how it put an abrupt end to his career when sound came in. Since 90% of the reasons given for a star's decline turn out to be phony, I always had some doubts about Griffith -- especially as most of the history books tell us that Griffith made no sound films at all other than "All Quiet on the Western Front". Well, "The Sleeping Porch" scoffs at that story -- and also confirms the one about his voice. It is just a whisper, and while they got around it here by casting Raymond as a man with a bad cold, obviously there are limits to the ways one can write around it. His voice is perfectly audible incidentally -- but very strange. The film is frankly awful -- it lists on the credits three cameramen and three sound technicians -- and they must have done nothing but get in each other's way. There is little to recommend the film as a comedy, save as an example of that sad period when the silent gag died and was replaced by the talkie situation gag. We're showing it solely as a rarity -- a Griffith sound comedy which makes interesting comparison with the silents recently shown by this society and by the Museum. John Litel, soon to become an invaluable stock player at Warners, was doing a lot of (straight) work in 2-reel comedies at this time -- often in leads.


Unlike Griffith, Harry Langdon did continue to play in sound films -- as a star in 2-reelers for Educational and Columbia, and as a supporting player in features, British and America, right up to his death in the mid-40's. But no once-great star ever appeared in so many "nothing" sound films as did Langdon; and of course it was largely his own fault, since he himself had caused his own downfall with his mistaken belief that he could write and direct his own material. "Tired Feet" is hardly a really good comedy, but it is certainly one of Harry's better 2-reel talkies. It has much the same feel to it as some of his better screenlets -- the story-line and the presence of Vernon Dent help to substantiate this too -- but the pacing and timing, so much a part of the earlier Langdons, are both way off, and much of what might have been very funny falls flat because of this. Nevertheless, it's an interesting film -- and for Langdon devotees (aren't we all) it's good to see that baby-face again, even if some of the innocence has been jaded a bit by time, and to enjoy those gestures and motions that were so exclusively Harry's.

And two who did make it --

"Laughing Gravy" (Ko-K-Hal Roach,1931) 2 reels; director: James Horne; starring Laurel and Hardy, with Charles Hall.

Pacing is the main trouble with this comedy too; some of it is just too protracted and methodical, but that, after all, is a flaw of many of the Laurel and Hardy films, and I think it's only coincidental that this one happens to be an early talkie. It's certainly lots of fun, with some typical savagery and unhealthy touches (the climax especially), and Charles Hall, looking singularly seedy with a mustache, unshaven chin and wrinkled nightshirt, really goes through the mill in this -- even though part of one his disasters is Missing from this well-used print.
"The Spy in Black" (U.S. title: "U Boat 29") Columbia-British, 1939

Dir: Michael Powell; scenario, Emeric Pressburger;
Music: Miklos Rozsa; camera: Bernard Bryne; art direction, Frederick Pusey;
supervising art director, Vincent Korda; produced by Irving Asher. 8 reels.

Starring Conrad Veidt, with Sebastian Shaw, Valerie Hobson, Karius Goring, June Duprez, Athole Stewart, Agnes Leachlan, Helen Haye, Mary Lorris, Cyril Raymond, George Summers, Hay Petrie, Grant Sutherland, Robert Hendell, Margaret Moffett, Kenneth Warrington, Torin Thatcher, Bernard Miles, Skelton Knaggs.

Not a great or even very important film, "The Spy in Black" is one of those thoroughly satisfying movies, full of good solid craftsmanship, which is somehow never revived or remembered, and which is always passed over in favor of better known yet less interesting films like "Night Train to Kuala". It holds up beautifully today, and in a technical sense especially, dates far less than many films of that period ("Night Train", "Q Planes") which were often marred by production crudities, obvious miniatures and special effects, and so forth.

It was a strange film to bring out in 1939 -- with Britain on the brink of war with Germany, a film with a German hero was odd timing indeed! Although made before the war actually started, it was released after the declaration of war - and proved a big success. Perhaps with the full realities of war still in the future, the British found comfort in its "civilised" attitude towards war, and its depiction of the German as a sympathetic and gentlemanly opponent. "An Englishman's Home", a violently propagandist piece, took quite the opposite tack - and was most unpopular. In any case, Veidt was quite popular in England at the time, and his "Dark Journey" (1937) had been a big hit and was still in circulation. "Spy in Black" boosted his popularity still further, and that of Valerie Hobson too; a year later they co-starred again in another film for Powell, "Contraband" (U.S.: "Blackout") - a good melodrama of World War 2, with Veidt again as the hero -- a Dutch hero.

Thereafter Veidt found a new career playing Nazis in Hollywood - "All Through the Night", "Casablanca" and all the rest. In '39, Valerie Hobson (who had returned to England in 1937, following a stay in Hollywood of some years - "Pride of Frankenstein" et al) was riding high as England's no. 1 leading lady -- possibly a more popular star than Anna Neagle, though with less boxoffice prestige. Her period of top popularity was fairly short-lived ("Q Planes" and "This Man is News" were two of her best; in the latter, and a sequel, "This Man in Paris", she teamed up with Barry K. Barnes to provide an excellent British equivalent of Norah and Dick Charles) but she remained active up until the present. The rest of the cast is full of familiar faces, including in minor roles, Robert Hendell (an earlier Sherlock Holmes) and Skelton Knaggs -- that old reliable of the Val Lewtons.

Perhaps "Spy in Black" scores most on its pictorial aspects, which inherit a lot from the German cinema. Veidt eavesdropping as he leans against a wall recalls an image of Cesare from "Caligari"; as he strides the nifty boat deck, "Nosferatu" springs to mind. And Powell and Pressburger contribute a number of typical pictorial effects of their own -- the trunk tumbling downstairs, for example, Powell's love of (and experience with) the sea shows through quite clearly in several beautifully composed scenes too.

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Next Wednesday - SCARS OF JEALOUSY (Ince, '23) A CHAPTER IN HER LIFE ('23)