SILS - A NOSTALGIC LOOK BACK

Since consilience has now become entirely too political, with hydrogen bombs and U-2 planes, and the existence (not even the fate!) of nations hanging in the balance, it has stopped being the gentlemanly, civilised game it used to be. Even warfare is no longer a sporting proposition. Gone forever, alas, are the gentlemanly opponents, like Paul Lukas in "The Lady Vanishes", who are allowed to escape unscathed at the end with a "jolly good luck" attitude. Now the stakes are too high and too impersonal, and the old-style master spy ring is as out of date as the western vigilantes. It's both frightening to realise that "Foreign Correspondent" is already twenty years old -- and also to realise how much has happened in those twenty years. Anyway, tonight we're going to look back at consilience of earlier days -- the cliched, foron-fatal brand that the brave men loved to kid us was the real thing; Hitchcock's brand -- smoother, less absurd -- and the British War Department's concoction -- probably pretty close to the real thing, although in retrospect, it too seems to belong to another age.

"LADENOIZELLE DOCTEUR" (Trafalgar, 1937) Excerpts only; ten minutes.
  Directed by Edmund Crotville; photographed by Arthur Finck; starring Erich von Stroheim, Rita Parlo, Clare Luce, John Loder, Raymond Lovell, Clifford Evans, John Abbott.

An initially ambitious film (a remake of a Dabet), "Ladenoizelle Docteur" fell rather flat when money ran short, and it had to be finished quickly and cheaply. Nevertheless, it was an entertaining opus in the traditional old spy fashion, with Erich on top form, and some lovely closeups of the nude Luce and Parlo. In his book "Hollywood Scare-crow", Peter Noble quotes Clifford Evans on the ways that Stroheim improved the film by directorial suggestions, and improvised "bits of business" in individual scenes. These latter are quoted at some length, but in the film they prove to be either non-existent or exaggerated out of all proportion to what was done. Presumably Evans hadn't seen the film in years, and was relying on his memory and ideas that had been suggested since -- thus do the myths grow & multiply!

"NEXT OF KIN" (Caling, 1942) Producer: Michael Felsen; Director: Thorold Dickinson; screenplay by Dickinson, Basil Bartlett, Angus LoPhail, John Rich; music: William Walton; Art Director: Tom Morris; Camera: Ernest Palmer. 8 reels

Is there such a thing as a "complete and uncut" print? We're beginning to doubt it. Firstly believing it, and without intent to defraud, we so described this print -- and indeed, it is "more" complete than Universal's U.S. release print, which deleted all the raw dialogue, the reference to dope addiction, and so on. Then we made the fatal error of calling Thorold Dickinson to discuss the film -- and our craggy little world fell apart.

Mr. Dickinson, after first suggesting that we not show the film, went on at some (and very interesting) length to describe the various versions of the film. Its initial showing in England was held up because of a forthcoming Commando raid -- and such a "defeatist" approach before a similar raid would...
have been bad for morale. At Churchill's request, the film was held for a while.
Then the raid was a success — such a success, in fact, that Churchill was
again worried about the film's reaction. He suggested that it might be easier
to take if Dickinson would insert "lots more dead Germans" into the film's
climax. Dickinson went along with this, but now the War Department wasn't
happy; the sombre message they were trying to ram home was partially nullified
by all these teutonic corpses. More chances. The film initially was designed
only as a training film for troops, and when selling finally decided to put it
into release after all, Dickinson recalls that he had to take out about
"20 seconds of really gruesome stuff", but that even so it remained grim and
raw -- so much so that people often fainted during its showing.

Of its US prints, Dickinson is far from happy. The release version he terms
a travesty of the original. And the Army version, he says, was but scarcely
better. Apparently it was edited by a cutter at the Selznick Studios, who
wasn't worried about censorship (thus leaving in the cuss words!) but tried
to make a "gentle and unassuming" film out of it by trimming it of shock, the
idea being that in its original version it would (a) be too grim for American
troops, as yet unversed in warfare, and (b) would lower their respect for the
British people.

Ir. Dickinson however, was not specific about missing scenes, saying merely
that "climaxes had been shortened" and that "all the cuts were removed".
Frankly it's difficult to see how many scenes could be improved by prolonged
climaxes, or how added "cuts" would make the points any better. I admit that
the combat scenes don't seem quite as vivid to me now as they did when I saw
the complete (?) English release version -- but that, after all, was eighteen
years ago. To a child, these same scenes might have seemed far more gripping,
especially as this was before Hollywood films got so bloody and sadistic in
their combat scenes. Too, one must remember that Ir. Dickinson has had
singularly bad luck with American cutting of his films. "Secret People" was
butchered beyond belief, and reportedly "Hill 24 Does Not Answer" was also
tampered with. Understandably he is bitter, and possibly over the years the
damage to "Next of Kin" has taken on added proportions to him. I do not say
this is so -- after all, if one cannot accept the verdict of the maker of the
film, whose verdict is valid? And yet there have been plenty of examples of
directorial ire being only moderately justified.

In any event, with all the drawbacks listed by Ir. Dickinson, this version of
"Next of Kin" is still an extremely powerful one. It was hardly a popular
film in England at the time, since memories of the Dieppe raid (the basis of
the film) were still too recent. Not only was its staggering casualty list
a personal blow to hundreds of families, but it proved that the time of
invasion was still a long way off. (Many people actually thought that the raid
was the beginning of the invasion). Yet for all its grimness, there are
pleasing touches of comedy, and more than a casual affinity with some of the
Hitchcock films. Since everybody hates dentists, it was a sly touch to make
one of the German agents a dentist -- just as Hitchcock had done in "The Man
Who Knew Too Much". And as in "The Lady Vanishes" (though for different and
more serious reasons) the Murder One guy escapes unscathed at the end.

British films of the time, and especially the Government-made propaganda
documentaries, painted a highly suspicious picture of the British people --
innocent shop-keepers, librarians, gentle old bee-keepers, smiling philosophically
from behind their pipes, invariably turned out to be Nazi agents --
and their simple methods of sending messages seemed to arouse the suspicion of
no body. German parachutists were the only enemies that the British
ever took really seriously, and doubtless -- if British movies were accurate
in their guesses -- there are thousands of innocent "little people" in
British shops and pubs, all undetected Nazis, carrying out their humdrum
little lives until the next Führer comes along.
"FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT" (UA-Walter Wanger, 1940) 12 reels
Directed by Alfred Hitchcock; screenplay by Charles Bennett and Joan Harrison; photography, Rudolph Mate; special production effects, William Cameron Menzies; photographic effects, Paul Beaver; edited by Dorothy Spencer; supervising editor, Otho Lovering; music, Alfred Newman; art direction, Alexander Golitzen; dialogue by James Hilton & Robt. Benchley


Since we've recently had the opportunity to see again Hitchcock's earlier Britiish spy thrillers, "Sabotage" and "The Man Who Knew Too Much" -- and are probably giving him up for lost after "Psycho" -- now may be an appropriate time to look again at this 20-year-old Hitchcock. It hasn't been shown in theatres for many years; on TV it's familiar enough, but usually in sadly hacked form. This print is not only absolutely complete (this time, an unqualified guarantee!) but also a brand new one into the bargain. (As a matter of record, we've added its TV and theatrical reissue trademarks, to provide a sort of "family tree").

In a sense, "Foreign Correspondent" is the last of the vintage Hitchcocks, although far from being the last good one. At the same time, "Rebecca" excelled, it's the film that ushered Hitchcocks melodramatics into the era of "Hit time" production. His second American film, it was his first spy story since "The Lady Vanishes", and is a strange mixture of old and new. Pleasantly, it takes us back to the era of Balkan intrigues, master spy rings, gentleman heavies, and all-important clauses in secret treaties. It contains some of Hitch's very best sequences -- the assassination in the rain, the hide and seek in the windmill, the attempted murder in the high tower, the picturesque groupings in the tatty little room off Charlotte Street. And there's a wonderful parade of characters too -- Edmund Gwenn's mousy but cute little killer for example, plus such old friends as Basserman, Cianelli and, unbilled, Alexander Granach looking far more presentable than in last week's "Noseforatu".

But it is also Hitchcock doing a "super" production -- the beginning of the spiral that wound up in the abysmal "To Catch a Thief", the routine "The Man Who Knew Too Much" and the enjoyable but top-heavy "North by Northwest". It is all-star; it is too long; it is too slow in getting under way; and after the sensible and functional heroines he'd been used to (Madeleine Carroll, Sylvia Sidney, Margaret Lockwood, Edna Ferr) Laraine Day consumes all too much footage for the little that she contributes. (A lovely young lady, Laraine Day, formerly Johnson, had just begun to move into serious dramatics after a series of George O'Brien westerns and a number of stunts as Dr. Kildare's girl friend). And the swirling, roaringly spectacular climax of the airliner's crash into the sea -- exciting stuff though it is -- is more how less dramatic than the simpler besieged, stalled train in "The Lady Vanishes".

But the good things, and the overall fun, certainly outweigh the occasional slowness (which, let it be said, is mainly in the opening stages. Once the film gets going, it maintains pace well). Hitch, whose guest spot is early in the film, gets wonderful assistance from cameraman Hako, and William Cameron Menzies -- whose opening shot is just a duplicate of his opening shot in Doug Fairbanks' "Reaching for the Moon".

Hardly had Hitch finished his "last vintage film" than Fritz Lang made a similar last stand with "Manhunt". The climax of "Foreign Correspondent" shows Hitch taking himself seriously for perhaps the first time; unfortunately, he never quite got over it. BlR. K. Everson