Two British Films


U.S. release: 1952

With Robert Nevin, Richard Burtt, Kathleen Harrison, Avis Scott, Susan Shaw, Robin Natscher, Kenneth Griffith, Olive Sloan, James Hayter, Charles Vidor, Michael Brennan, Duncan Ramon. 8 reels.

Curiously neglected in Britain, despite some excellent reviews, "Waterfront" went into release as the top half of a none-too-strong (commercially) double-bill (the bottom half was a feeble comedy also from Rank) and was promptly forgotten. It was two years before it reached the U.S. when fitted out with a new title, "Waterfront Women". It opened at the Rialto in Times Square backed by the inevitable lurid display suggesting all kinds of sin and sex. Since there is relatively little sex in the film, the blown-up display stills had nothing more to work with than a shot of the heroine straightening her stockings! Obviously not having the stuff needed for rough-house audiences, it died a quick death and disappeared again. Why the art houses have never rediscovered it --- even, belatedly, as a Richard Burton vehicle --- is a mystery. The film is a beauty; certainly one of the best British films since the end of the war, and it hardly deserves its obscurity.

The film was director Michael Anderson's first; and as with Welles, Mancolian, Huston and a handful of other directors, it remains far and away his best. It never ceases to amaze how a director can turn out such a beautifully wrought work as his first effort -- and then, the more he learns about film, the less he is able to offer. Anderson is certainly far from a has-been, but the more important the properties he has been assigned --- "Around the World in 80 Days", "The Dam Busters", "All the Fine Young Cannibals", "The Naked Edge" --- the less personal has his work seemed.

"Waterfront" is something of a film noir, in a general sense akin to Carné's "Quai des Brumes" and Ford's "The Informer". It is like a pre-war film noir, warm, sensitive and human. Despite squalor and poverty, the emphasis is not on ugliness, but on the beauty within ugliness, and in this respect it also recalls the Griffith of "Broken Blossoms" and "Isn't Life Wonderful?". The dingy Northern English streets and the rain-soaked cobblestones have become a location cliché ever since "Room at the Top", and it says much for "Waterfront" that it is still as effective and powerful as ever, despite the intervening decade of pointlessly angry film-makers who are even more pointlessly provided with the wherewithal to display their anger on the screen.

Apart from its direction, its striking camerawork and a score that makes excellent use of "Les Preludes". "Waterfront" scores superbly on its performances. Richard Burton and Avis Scott, both unfamiliar faces then, are tremendously effective as the young lovers. Kathleen Harrison, primarily known as a cockney comedienne, switches to straight dramatics with wonderful ease. Kenneth Griffith repeats his familiar characterisation as the snivelling, loquacious little rotter --- but he is so good at it that not using him would be the equivalent of Warners using someone other than Fred MacMurray as the house detective. But the biggest surprise of all is Robert Newton who, in a comparatively small role, completely subdues his normal bravura style and outright ham to give a restrained, underplayed, and, in his final scene, thoroughly poignant performance.
"The Way to the Stars" (U.S. title: "Johnny in the Clouds")
Produced by Anatole de Grunwald; Directed by Anthony Asquith; Script by Terence Rattigan and de Grunwald; from a story by Rattigan, based on a scenario by Rattigan and R. Sherman. Poems by John Fudney. Camera - Derek Williams; 2nd Unit Cameramen - Gay Green, Jack Hildyard; Assoc. Producer - Gordon Parry; Music - Nicholas Brodsky; Editor - Fergus McDonell. 2nd Unit Director - Charles Saunders. 10 Reels
(Despite the U.S. title, this is the full and uncut version)

"The Way to the Stars" was a fantastic success at the British boxoffice, a blockbuster that one just couldn't avoid seeing. After a saturation release on a major circuit, all the second-run houses picked it up; then a whole circuit replayed it, and there was an official "reissue" within a couple of years. The critics loved it, and so did the public. Every time a film of this type comes along, one tends to build up a resistance to it, if only to avoid becoming one of the sheep. But, by the law of averages, the sheep can sometimes be right it seems. (I was quite late in catching up, rather reluctantly, with the film - and was surprised to find out how good it really was, just as everybody had been claiming.)

There are a number of explanations for the film's success. For one thing, British films were then in the midst of their highest prestige period. This was one of the biggest, and it had a top-heavy star roster of popular players. Too, its mood caught audiences at just the right time. "Brief Encounter" had persuaded housewives, harried by rationing, bombings and other inconveniences, that petty self-sacrifice was somehow an ennobling thing. "The Way to the Stars", with the war at its end, preached patriotism, stiff-upper-lip and shoulder-to-shoulder camaraderie when such preachments were really no longer necessary. Although nobody would admit it, the film enabled the British to put themselves discreetly on the back and say "Yes, that's how we behaved, and that's why we won!"

And finally, the Anglo-American spirit of friendship was then at an all-time high. The grim heritage of pizza pies and hot-dog emporiums had only secured but a tenuous foothold in Leicester Square, and it was more fashionable to like the Americans than to like the British. Admittedly, one saw some pretty horridous specimens stalking the London streets by night -- but the average Britisher donned his rose-colored glasses and forced himself to the unlikely supposition that there might even be an odd Englishman or two behaving in like fashion in the streets of New York at that very moment. No, the average Britisher's impression of the average American was not the brush loud-mouth that one saw in the street, but the open, boyish and generous young man that one took into one's home for a Sunday dinner. And for the most part, romanticised or not, this impression was probably a reasonably accurate one. In any event, the film neatly reinforced the idea that there were more nice Americans (like Douglas Montgomery) than bad ones, and that even the loud-mouths (like Bonar Colleano) were really not so bad at heart. The British wouldn't have stood for this viewpoint in an American movie of course, as they never took the Americans that seriously. Most Britishers regarded "Mrs Miniver" as a well-intentioned pat on the back, but it was hardly closer to reality than "Alona of the South Seas". "Salute John Citizen" was much more the Englishman's cup of tea. That he could take seriously -- altho'
he didn't bother going to see it in sufficient numbers for it to make much of a dent at the boxoffice.

All these factors, and probably several others, made "The Way to the Stars" a film admirably attuned to the times and to the country. Retitled (and drastically cut) for U.S. release, it failed in this country -- just as 1945's "The Best Years of Our Lives" created but little stir in Britain. (It's rather interesting that both of these films were advertised not on timeliness or theme, but solely on the parade of stars that they offered. The posters for each film are almost identical.)

Because so many years have gone by, and times and tempos have changed, and the last war even seems rather small potatoes in view of subsequent developments, "The Way to the Stars" obviously no longer exerts quite the same universal appeal today. Some of the little bits of business seem just a shade too contrived, the characters just a shade too "typical." Such things irk not because they don't pay off, but because we know that they were put in just because they were guaranteed to pay off. But on the whole, thanks to some fine performances and one of those typically schmaltzy pseudo-classic scores that English composers love so well (and that all sound the same) -- the film does retain much of its emotional and dramatic values. It's still a good film -- and its opening was good enough for Henry King to lift in toto for the opening of his "Twelve O'Clock High".

Asquith is a curious, erratic, unreliable but always interesting director. When he makes a pot-boiler, it can be almost devoid of style -- or, as he did with "Moscow Nights" in 1935, he can give it so much style that it becomes absurd. His best pictures are not necessarily his earliest ones (one can hardly consider "Shooting Stars" an Asquith film), and his most enjoyable films are not necessarily his best. (My personal Asquith favorites are "Underground", "Cottage to Let" -- why doesn't a print of that one turn up? -- and "French Without Tears", all of them trifles). Certainly however, "The Way to the Stars" would come close to the top of any list of Asquith's best films, a list which would automatically also have to include "A Cottage on Dartmoor", "Tell England" and "Pygmalion". "The Way to the Stars" also seems to mark the end of one phase of Asquith's career -- although he had tackled several stage adaptations prior to it, he had never specialized in filmed plays. But since "The Way to the Stars", starting with "While the Sun Shines" and "The Winslow Boy", he has concentrated more and more (albeit often very creatively) on theatrical derivations, in a rough ratio of one original work to every four transferred plays. Nevertheless, he remains one of the better British directors, and hasn't lost all his steam the way Tyler has.

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William K. Everson

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NEXT PROGRAM: Tuesday next, July 17.
KISMET (1920) with Otis Skinner; plus Sennett, Biograph, Vitagraph and other early shorts.

Our next eight programs are documented on the Bulletin that was issued last month. Interesting sound material from the thirties is already beginning to stockpile for September and October, and among the items being held are such morsels as GOIN' TO TOWN (Kae West); Lewis Milestone's THE CAPTAIN HATES THE SEA with Victor McLaglen and John Gilbert; John Ford's THA WHOLL TOWN'S TALKING with Edward G. Robinson and Jean Arthur, and NIGHT CLUB SCANDAL with John Barrymore. There are also some "in-between" items like Wellman's THE LIGHT THAT FAILED with Colman which need re-screening before decisions are made. Our policy of course is to disregard tv exposure totally (if the film is of interest or merit) on the theory that seeing, it on tv is tantamount to not seeing, it at all.

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