

The British Film: Comedy and Cavalcanti: Program Two

"IT'S IN THE AIR" (Ealing Studios-ATP, 1939) Written & directed by Anthony Kimmins; produced by Basil Dean; music and lyrics by George Formby, Harry Gorrard, Fred E. Cliffe and Harry Farr-Davis; photographed by Ronald Neame and Gordon Dines; Assistant Director, Basil Dearden. 9 reels.

Starring George Formby, with Polly Ward, Garry Marsh, Julien Mitchell, Jack Hobbs, Frank Leighton, C. Denier Warren, Michael Shepley, Hal Gordon, Joe Cunningham, Jack Melford.

Most British comedians of the thirties had their roots in the theatre in one form or another. Last week's Jack Hulbert was a star of musical comedy, and the Tom Walls-Ralph Lynn-Robertson Hare trio were the stalwarts of the Aldwych farce. But the bulk of the screen comics, and most notably George Formby and Will Hay, came from the music halls, a sort of British vaudeville. These music halls operated in the suburbs of London, and in the big industrial cities, but there were of course a couple of big London theatres, the equivalent of the Palace in New York, to which the cream of the crop graduated. Formby and Hay were very much the cream.

Many British comics of the period, though distinctly regional in humour and accent (Gordon Harker and Max Miller were cockney comedians, Sandy Powell a typical midlands comic) did achieve fairly universal popularity throughout all of Britain. Others, like Frank Randall, found their popularity limited largely to their own home bases, and their screen careers were thus brief, or limited to cheap pictures which could recoup their costs locally. Formby was the only "regional" comedian to overcome the drawback of a pronounced accent and dialect, and become a popular name outside of England. His comedies were especially popular in Canada, and they even had a limited and spasmodic payoff in the United States, though usually in a somewhat pruned form. "It's in the Air", when released here in 1940, was shorn of some twenty minutes, but our print tonight is complete.

Formby's screen character, and the content of his films, can roughly be paralleled with Harold Lloyd. Formby was usually the good-natured, small-town goof, who wants to make good for his girl, and who is always being taken advantage of by others. Like Lloyd, Formby is honest, likeable and anxious to get ahead - but not quite as smart as he thinks he is. He comes out on top through his own good nature rather than real talent. And like Lloyd, Formby combined thrills with his comedy, usually being accidentally involved in chases, races (his motor cycle escapes in the TT races for "No Limit" provided a real thrill) or, as here, in a runaway plane. Few Formby films were quite as good as they might have been in this respect since Ealing Studios in the thirties were not as adept at movie-making as they were to become in the forties. There was a certain lack of polish to their films then, sound recording was somewhat below standard, and the slapstick occasionally crude. Had Formby been accorded the production values that Gainsborough afforded Jack Hulbert, he might have produced some genuine classics instead of films that are vastly enjoyable, but fall somewhat short of inspiration. Ironically, one of the very best Formby films was "Spare a Copper", made during the war, in which (as Hitchcock did simultaneously in "Saboteur") he did everything he'd done before -- but with a new zip and polish.

Two further Formby ingredients: as the perennial innocent, he was frequently involved with vamps, undressed models and the like, and provided with double-entendre dialogue. However, the bulk of his harmlessly "blue" material was reserved for his racy little songs, where it became doubly harmless - for foreigners at least - since the outrageously double-entendre lines skipped by in a Lancaster accent before their meaning sunk in! Formby's first song in "It's in the Air" contains a few such lines, although it's mild compared to such classic Formby ditties as "Mr Wu's a Window Cleaner Now!" But even if one doesn't grasp all that Formby is singing about, his infectious grin and the melodic zip of his peppy little songs are always enjoyable to listen to.

"It's in the Air" was, up to that time, the most ambitious Formby film in terms of length and production value, and also the most successful. Others certainly had funnier ingredients, but to those not familiar with George, this is certainly a reliably representative introduction, and still one of his better films. Made in those immediate pre-war months when everybody was busily preparing for the war, yet was confident that it would never happen, "It's in the Air" uses the war scare for purely comedy purposes and doesn't even find it necessary to inject any patriotic propaganda. The implication is that with men like George in the RAF, England has nothing to fear from Germany!

Some of the "awkward squad" and other service comedy is a little over-familiar today, due to its over-use by Abbott & Costello, Laurel & Hardy, Martin & Lewis and others in the intervening years, but like any good vaudeville-type routine, most of it holds up quite well. And the climactic runaway plane sequence is a surprisingly polished piece of work, with some excellent stunt flying combined with well disguised special effects to provide a piece of technical virtuosity quite rare in British films at that time. Incidentally, some of the big scenes of crowd turmoil in the air-raid "exercises" are actually stock shots borrowed from "Things to Come" of three years earlier, reminding us again how rapidly that prophetic vision came to fruition.

----- I N T E R M I S S I O N -----

"THEY MADE ME A FUGITIVE" (Warner Bros., 1948) Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti  
Produced by N.A. Bronsten for A.R. Shipman Productions; screenplay  
by Noel Langley from the novel "A Convict Has Escaped" by Jackson  
Budd; music by Marius Francois Gaillard; camera: Otto Heller; 9 rls.  
Starring Trevor Howard, Sally Gray and Griffith Jones, with Rene Ray, Mazy  
Merrall, Charles Farrell, Cyril Smith, Jack Raine, Phyllis Robin, Vida Hope,  
Eve Ashley, Jack McNaughton, Maurice Denham, Ballard Berkeley, Michael Brennan,  
Bill O'Connor, Lyn Evans.

One of a group of tough thrillers produced for A.R. Shipman, owner of a large chain of British movie-theatres, who was convinced (perhaps wrongly) that this was what the public was buying at that time, it was rather lost in the shuffle at the time simply because so many other (and inferior) films of the same breed were on the market. In the U.S., Warners changed the title to "I Became a Criminal", and perhaps thereby stressed its inherent relationship to their own crime films of the early thirties ("I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang") and the late thirties ("They Made Me a Criminal").

Post-war Britain (and specifically London) presented a grim and rather drab picture. With the patriotic fervour of the war gone, and the victory celebrations over, one found that many of the hardships of war remained -- the austerity, the rationing -- and that even though the bombings were gone, violence in civil life was on the rise. London was rife with seedy gangsterism, and just as films like "The Public Enemy" and "The Roaring Twenties" had earlier shown WWI veterans drifting - or being pushed-into crime - so did British films of the period comment on a like repetition of history, not a decade after it happened, but while it was happening. This resulted in a curious cycle of British gangster films, some ("No Orchids for Miss Blandish" being the obvious and outstanding example) being outright copies of American gangster films, and others, like "Good Time Girl", seizing on current newspaper stories and enlarging them via large doses of sadistic brutality. (Razor-slashing gangs were all the vogue then!) Such films had two convenient villains: the maladjusted British veteran, and the G.I. deserter, usually played by Bonar Colleano.

Even at the time, "They Made Me a Fugitive" seemed one of the most accomplished of this cycle, but in retrospect it also seems not only one of the best, but also one of the most realistic and least-sensationalized. Thanks to Cavalcanti's style and mordant humour, it lifts itself well above the standard gangster-action level. Much of the film is set in an undertaking parlour - front for the black-market activities. There is also a strange, Bunuel-like sequence, in which an apparently kindly and lonely lady turns out to be a maniac who wants her husband killed. This sequence admittedly rather upsets the balance of realism, and the film would probably be better off without it, important plot motivator though it turns out to be. Visually, the film has that arty look that Cavalcanti adopted so frequently -- the rain-soaked alleys, tilted cameras and preponderance of studio exteriors are strikingly in contrast to the natural realism of last week's "Went The Day Well?". But the overall picture it paints is a distressingly accurate one, and the action scenes are slammed over with a slickness not usually encountered in British melodramas. Pleasingly, there's no attempt to blame "society", little self-pity for the basically decent hero, and a powerfully off-beat ending, neither happy nor dramatically unhappy, yet effectively unsatisfying. Trevor Howard is ideally cast as a successor to Cagney and Garfield, and Griffith Jones (formerly a light comedian and leading man in the Robert Young manner) here so effectively acquired a cockney accent and a convincing nastiness that, like Dick Powell in "Murder My Sweet", he found himself launched on a whole new career of two-fisted thuggery.

Incidentally, this may well be the last chance to see "They Made Me a Fugitive" over here, since a few months ago the American negative was destroyed and all known prints likewise junked.

----- WE, K. EVERTON -----  
NEXT TUESDAY - Feb. 19th - COMEDY & CAVALCANTI PROGRAM #3  
WILL HAY and JOHN MILLS in "THE BLACK SHEEP OF WHITEHALL" (1941)  
RICHARD T ODD and STEPHEN MURRAY in "FOR THEM THAT TRESPASS" (1950)