A Program of Off-Beat Movies

"Lucky Stare" (Paramount, 1935) Produced by Herbert Moulton; directed by Herman Hoffman;
With Lynne Overman, Gladys Swarthout, Virginia Weidler, Dickie Moore, One reel.

Actually there is nothing terribly off-beat about this pleasing little short, but it was squeezed off one of our recent programs to make room for "God's Gift To Women", and this has been our first chance to re-schedule it. It's an enjoyable if over-simplified account of the screen-test procedure, giving Paramount an opportunity to plug both "Peter Ibbetson" and "Rose of the Rancho".

"The Little Lion Hunter" (Warner Brothers, 1939) Produced by Leon Schlesinger;
Directed by Charles M. Jones; 1 reel.

The handful of cartoons featuring Inki and the Minnabird, made by the Charles Jones unit in the early 40's, are some of the oddest cartoons ever made, and just how they got made is something of a mystery. For one thing, they aren't really funny and don't try to be. For another, they deliberately confuse audiences by constantly building to anti-climaxs, which fall doubly flat since they are usually accompanied by thudding chords of music which suggest that they are considered anything but anti-climactic. They achieve what laughs they have at the expense of the audience, which is perpetually fooled. As a theatre-manager in London, we've seen these comedies so frequently -- no two audiences ever reacted in quite the same manner. Laughter would come in different spots at each screening, and the only common denominator was that nobody seemed to like them very much! One seen on its own is almost useless; seeing three or more together doesn't make them funnier, but it makes their weird pattern a little easier to follow. Little Inki is something of a Harry Langdon character, an innocent of serious (and occasionally evil) intent, who is perpetually thwarted in everything he tries to do, and often without knowing how he is being thwarted. The Minnabird is a kind of Destiny figure, for the most part aloof from both sides, unapproachable and indestructible. Somewhere along the line he does make one gesture on Inki's behalf, and the little fellow promptly turns to him in friendship with outstretched beak (very much a La Langdon) -- only to be unexpectedly kicked and deserted again by the enigmatic bird. If there is any kind of philosophy behind all this, it is obviously a pessimistic one. Undoubtedly if they were being made today, with International tensions backing up that pessimism, they'd be subject to all kinds of deep-dish analysis and "Film Culture" would have a field-day. But in the early 40's, nobody took cartoons that seriously, and this odd little series passed un-noticed. Cartoons that are neither serious nor funny obviously can't have too much of a market though, so perhaps it's not surprising that Inki never really caught on. "Little Lion Hunter" is one of the earlier ones in the series, but is nevertheless fairly typical. The rather charmingly straightforward drawing was transformed later into more stylised, less realistic form, but the basic dream-like pattern and the exploitation of anti-climaxes remained, as did the use of classical music (here mainly Mendelssohn) in the scoring.

"The Magician" (Poland, 1962) Directed by Tad Makarozyński; produced by Seminar Studios; one reel.

This showing is probably the first U.S. exposure of this quite remarkable short, written and directed by Tad Makarozyński, though since it is a Festival award-winner, I admit the possibility that Cinema 16 may have gotten to it before us. Anyway, it's a grim, savage and unpleasantly effective little anti-war allegory, presumably as much anti-Communist as anti-Nazi, but so well presented that no current political regime could take issue with it without a tacit admission of guilt! Indeed, the score seems to be borrowed (or taken) from Flop All posterettes, and Humores of Long-standing may be a little surprised to find some familiar Billy Bevan and Charlie Chase motifs turning up in a rather different context!

"Blotto" (MK-Hal Roach, 1930) Directed by James Parrott; story by Leo McCarey; starring LAUREL & HARDY. Two reels.

"Blotto" is a decidedly off-beat Laurel & Hardy in that it avoids slapstick entirely until its climax, and concentrates instead on mood and the sustaining of a single situation. Sometimes this technique laid the boys low, as in "3e Big", where one gag was incredibly stretched over three reels; but here it seems to work. By no means one of their better films, it is nevertheless neatly done and consistently amusing. Made in late 1929, and released in early 1930, it has better pacing and timing than most of their earliest talkies.

- Intermission -
"THE EAGLE AND THE HAWK" (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Stuart Walker; story by John Monk Saunders, adapted by Bogart Rogers and Seton I. Miller; photography directed by Harry Flashback; Testa.

With Fredric March, Cary Grant, Gail Lombard, Jack Oakie, Sir Guy Standing, Forrester Harvey, Leyland Hodgson, Russell Scott, Kenneth Howell, Douglas Scott, Crawford Kent, Paul Granjon, Jacques Jou-Jerulle, Robert Manning, Adrienne d'Ambricourt, York Sherwood, Olaf Hytten, Lane Chandler, Dennis O'Keefe

The World War One aviation cycle that had started with 1927's "Wings" was here in its sixth year, and like Rko's "Ace of Aces", "The Eagle and the Hawk" was basically a programmer cashing in on a popular cycle, and cutting a lot of economical corners. Much of the spectacular aerial footage is lifted out of "Wings", and new combat scenes are done largely with back projection — a device conspicuously absent from "Hell's Angels". Nevertheless, it's a tight, very compact, and overall extremely well done film, with its programmer status no stigma at all. John Monk Saunders, who had written a large percentage of the earlier air epics, here turns out a story that was quite out of the standard rut for its day. It's up to date enough to fit into what current critics so conveniently term "anti-hero" war films.

But there's no time wasted over prolonged soul-searching, and in keeping with the generally fast-paced development, that pleasant old device of introducing the characters pictorially in the credits is used in a genuinely creative sense by showing the leads in scenes that do not subsequently form a part of the picture proper. In a series of deft images we get to know the characters and their backgrounds, so that when we meet them again we know enough about them for no further explanations, flashbacks or other details to be necessary.

Obviously, it's the spectacular air-war scenes that hold the most appeal today, and these are well and stirringly done in the traditionally gentlemanly manner of the day, but dramatically the film is up to — surprisingly well in fact, considering the many World War Two films ("12 O'Clock High" at all) which posed the same situations so frequently that they rapidly became cliche. Much of the film's strength lies in Fredric March, who gives one of the best of his earlier performances. Often accused of copying John Barrymore, March does, admittedly, give a rather Barrymore-ish performance here. However, the role itself, calling for dash, pathos and melodrama, for love scenes and near-mad scenes, is so perfect a Barrymore part that one really can't blame March for turning his performance in that direction.

Lombard, in the equivalent of Harlow's "Hell's Angels" role, is cool and lovely in her few scenes, and once again it is a sheer pleasure to watch Sir Guy Standing perform. Perhaps, like George Arliss, he was always the same, but as the urbane, professional Englishman, he was unmatched. Perhaps his highestop of sueve underplaying comes when an entire squadron (green replacements, of course) is wiped out via one direct hit, "Seems a pity....." murmurs Sir Guy, before getting down to more urgent matters.

There are certain cliches in this kind of fare that would be missed were they absent. The toasting of an enemy — the humble, tactless batman, chattering endlessly about all of his "gentlemen" who have been shot down — the outbursts against sending "kids" into war. They're all here and add a great deal to the enjoyment. But the basic script has a great deal more depth than usual, and would have been even stronger had the original ending been maintained. As it is now, the film closes on a closeup of a monument dedicated to the film's hero. Originally, the script took things a step further. It is after the war. The monument is in the hero's home town. The townspeople have come to take it for granted, and have forgotten it. The one person who has not forgotten — the dead fighter's buddy — knows that it is both, it is a meaningless symbol. But perhaps this decidedly down-beat ending wouldn't have worked as well as the more conventional ending that was finally used, and which did at least follow on the heels of a decidedly unconventional climax.

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44 ERRATUM This is not next Tuesday, but Tuesday the 14th.

Coming: Tuesday the 21st: LAW & ORDER (1932) — Edward Cahn-John Huston, with Walter Huston, Harry Carey, Ralph Ince, Raymond Hatton
Tuesday May 28th: D.W. Griffith's THE SORROWS OF SATAN (1926)