Next Tuesdays Four phases of Chaplin's "20 Minutes of Love" (Keystone), "The Rink" (Mutual) "The Idle Class" (First National) and "The Circus" (U.A.)

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
March 10 1934

Program One in a cycle of British films of the 30's and 40's

"SOUTH RIDING" (Korda-London Film Productions-UA, 1936) Produced and directed by Victor Saville; supervised by Alexander Korda; screenplay by Ian Dalrymple and Donald Bull, from the novel by Winifred Holtby; camera; Harry Stradling; associate producer, Stanley Haynes; musical score, Richard Addinsell; settings; Laurence Harrison; special effects by Laurence Butler and Eddie Cohen. 9 reels.

With Ralph Richardson, Anna Neagle, Edmund Gwenn, Ann Todd, Marie Lohr, Milton Rosser, John Glement, Glynis Johns, Ronald Williams, Lewis Casson, Edward Lexy, Jean Cadell, Peggy Novak, Josephine Wilson, Laura Smithson, Florence Gregson, Joan Allum, Arthur Hambling, Gua McNaughton, Skelton Knaggs, Ralph Truman, Felix Aylmer.

English novels of the thirties, and the movies based on them, rarely came to serious grips with the social problems of the times. The approach was usually a "social" one, with the rather superficial probing of housing and other problems all but hidden behind a romantic facade. The American treatment of its social problems was more aggressive and direct but in a way scarcely more honest, using a melodramatic rather than romantic frame; theatrical films from England and the U.S. which were most honest about depression-era problems were usually those - like the British Graelie Fields vehicles which set out with no "social purpose", and merely used the background of the times realistically and unconsciously. The straight, unvarnished truth (though this too could be and often was, distorted) was left to the documentation. Only in the early 40's did both countries begin to make social essays without supplementing the pill - "The Grapes of Wrath" in the US, "Love on the Dole" in Britain.

"South Riding" is both one of the most typical of Britain's polite problem pictures, and also one of the best and most entertaining. A big success in 1936 (not least because of a production polish still not common in British movies, though more common in those from the Korda studios), it had the curious effect of seeming very old-hat and dated in the 40's when the mere realistic social aspects hit the screen. But now, almost thirty years later, it falls back into its proper perspective; not only is it good movie-making, but it is also fairly representative of Britain - and British thinking - in the thirties. As such it is, in its own way, of as much value as "The Grapes of Wrath". The Steinbeck story is an accurate and uncompromising record of events that happened. "South Riding", by its very compromise and avoidance of real issues, is an equally accurate record of attitudes.

However, perhaps I over-stress the film's "social" content, for certainly it is as a drama and a romance that it holds up best. Rather pretentiously, it labels itself in the programme as "An English Landscape". Actually (and this does not apply to the book necessarily, for people have not read as much thereof as I have, and memories are unreliable) it has far less feeling for the land than Alfred Hitchcock's silent comedy, "The Farmer's Wife". Were it not for the huge estate and Manor House, so impractical in the thirties, and representing a withdrawal from the old aristocratic way of life just as Tara did in "Gone With The Wind", "South Riding" could tell its tale just as effectively in a London slum suburb. And with a little more sex, it wouldn't be too far removed from "Pride and Prejudice" either. The only extra-marital affair in "South Riding" is a rather shoddy and nasty one, as precious little footage although it's an important plot element. But then British extra-marital affairs always seem rather shoddy and nasty, since they invariably take place to the tune of meetings on rain-soaked cobblestones, or while dashing away to catch the last bus!

The mild parallel with "Gone With the Wind" isn't stressed enough for it to be deliberate, but another plagiarism is a little more obvious. The whole interweaving of the impersonated and impoverished aristocrat, insane wife, high-strung daughter and sensible and wholesome young teacher is of course a complete steal from "Jane Eyre" - and it is because it is such a steal that the final outcome is in too much doubt. However, perhaps it is unfair to pick so many holes in a film that is still such a polished and enjoyable piece of pretentious holnum. Certainly, it is extremely well served by its players. Anna Neagle, who normally gives a more appealing performance, Richardson is his usual self (which is enough) and Ann Todd has some fine moments as the insane wife. (Odd to recall that they later played father and daughter in "Breaking the Sound Barrier", with Richardson carrying his two years rather better than Miss Todd). Glynis Johns, in her first movie role, is exceptionally good. Marie Lohr is the staunch English figure-head to the life (how many of them still behave in just such a manner) and there is some effectively seedy villainy from
Edmund Gwen and Milton Rosner (who was also quite an accomplished director). John Clements' earnest Young Socialist tends to date a little, mainly by virtue of that delicate little cough that tells you he isn't long for this world, but never gets uncomfortably real enough to convince you of that fact -- as Lillian Gish's did in "La Bohème". Last and in this case, least, there is also a really little performance from Skelton Knaggs, best remembered for his likewise ratty little performances in several Val Lewton horror films.

Harry Stradling's expert photography has a nice Hollywood gloss to it -- the simple little love-scene in the hotel lobby, photographed through palm fronds for example -- yet it manages to avoid the ultra-gloss of Stradling's Goldwyn period.

If the film's climax and 'solution' has a Cinderella-like quality to it, still there is truth in details. Having grown up in England in the thirties, I may be more nostalgically addicted to these details than they warrant, but nevertheless for me they carry that veneer of reality which makes the whole thing work. I recall seeing disused London busses used as dwelling places -- and remember too thinking how much fun it would be to live in a modest but comfortable house and live in a bus. I remember the superb English illogic of posting signs saying 'This road unsuitable for motors' when it looks perfectly suitable, the signs neglecting to mention that after about five miles the road disappears into a river. Some quite important English roads were in amazingly primitive straits until quite late in the 30's -- and still are.

One key road linking two important London suburb towns (the equivalents of Jersey City and Newark) was split by a 50 yard length of river. Since the only other route added 10 miles to the journey, motorists usually believed me (and other youngsters) who assured them that it was quite shallow -- and then were generous with their pennies when we ran to the blacksmith for horses to haul them out of the waterfall when they got stuck in the middle, as they invariably did. Since the adjacent Nestle's chocolate factory sent a delightful aroma to the river and the paper mill was a welcome place to spend a pleasant summer afternoon. But I digress -- the childhood flashback is unrelated, except to stress that the road sign and the water splash which appear at the mid-point of "South Riding" are quite authentic. So are many of the colloquialisms and dialogue expressions, and the two or three Britons who frequent Huff meetings will doubtless share my appreciation of the hired help who announces her arrival with "I've come to do for you" and describes the home she must clean up as being like a pig sty - "With knobs on".

"South Riding" incidentally was shot in the West Ridings of Yorkshire. The scenery captured is of the tranquil, Kentish, farming variety, and is far from being typical of the somber and often spectacular beauty that really characterises Yorkshire.

--- Intermission ---

"OH MR. FORSTER!" (Gainsborough, 1937) Directed by Marcel Varnel. Original story by Frank Launder; screenplay by Val Guest, J.C.J. Orton and Marriott Edgar; camera Arthur Crabtree; Art Direction: Vetchinsky; Musical direction: Louis Levy; Nine reels

With Will Hay, Graham Moffat, Moore Marriott, Dennis Wynanda, Sebastian Smith, Agnes Lauchlan, Percy Walsh, Dave O'Toole, Beatrice Varley.

Will Hay was by far the most popular British screen comedian in the late 30's. Jack Hulbert, the second of the "Big Three", made his best films prior to Hay's peak, and George Formby was at his best when the Hay decline began to set in. (In later years his health suffered, and attempts to change the format of his films resulted in no format at all, and a weakening of his basic screen character). At his peak, Hay was a phenomenal draw at the boxoffices. He made only one film a year, and it was a big one, with real production values, a good blending of action and comedy, and top script-writers and directors. The new Will Hay film was very much an event to look forward to, just as was the new Shirley Temple vehicle. And unlike the Marx Brothers and Laurel & Hardy, there were no real anti-Hay factions, no sharp division between those who worshipped him and those who hated him. He never developed into a cult, and his comedy was never really analysed or even regarded as being important enough to warrant analysis. Everybody seemed to like him -- or if they didn't, they kept quiet about it.

Thus it is surprising that Gainsborough, which had an effective releasing set-up with Fox in this country, and did export some of the Jack Hulbert comedies, never saw fit to send over the best Will Hay vehicles. So far as I can discover, tonight's showing of "Oh Mr. Porter" is an American premiere, and should be quite a revelation to those of you who know Hay only through his earliest movies, or his last ones. Both are having been represented on page
Hay sprang from the English music-halls, and his first films had very much of that flavor. They had vigor, charm and variety — some weren't even strictly speaking comedies — but they failed to develop a unique screen personality for Hay. He remained strictly a personality from the halls — and from radio — adequately but not very constructively transposed to the screen. Hay found himself, just as both Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy found themselves then, the right teaming. His partners became Graham Moffat, a rotund "Billy Bunter" of a schoolboy, and Moore Marriott. Marriott was actually a distinguished-looking middle-aged actor (he was the postman in "Green For Danger") transformed by makeup into a toothless octogenarian. Spry, cunning, agile and casually corrupt, he was teamed with Moffat (a little more honest, a little more innocent, but heading the same way) as a team within the team. Hay was invariably an outsider thrown in with them by circumstance; in working with them, he was also working against them and trying, unsuccessfully, to convince himself that their schemes are not as fool-proof as they seem.

While Hay brought much of his music-hall background and material to these films, he also seemed to draw heavily on aspects of American comedy. His basic character was not unlike that of N.C. Fields — a braggard and a blusterer, he was lazy, opposed to work, and ever-willing to profit by a dubious scheme if he thinks he can get away with it. Not as sadistic or an corrupt as Fields, he was nevertheless more than willing to be persuaded into corruption, against his will, by the blandishments of others. For the character's irresponsibility and foppishness Hay fell back to a certain extent on the mechanical props of Keaton. Hay's "Windbag the Sailor" was the most open "borrowing" from "The Navigator". "Where's That Fire!" used an ancient fire engine. Here, as in "The General", it's an ancient locomotive. Named "Gladstone", it is, like "The General", given a rather endearing personality of its own. "Oh Mr. Porter" is one of the best of the Hay-Moffat-Marriott films (and the one considered the best by the BFI, as a matter of fact), and I expect that "Windbag the Sailor" and "Ask a Policeman" warrant their re-discovery too — and is also one that best illustrates this welding of British music-hall humour with the more sophisticated styles of Keaton and Fields. Another Hay trademark: the genial poking-fun at the British love of antiquity and dislike of change. Buggleskelly Station isn't too exaggerated! Incidentally, their comedies were unique in never using leading ladies or romantic elements or sub-plots of any kind. Indeed, heroines of the usual kind were conspicuous by their absence. In "Good Morning Boys", Lillie Palmer was a vamp-villainess, and Marjorie Hunt was used occasionally — for deflation purposes only — as the equivalent of Margaret Dumont. Graham Moffat did have a girl-friend in "Ask a Policeman", but only so that the plot could get rolling. It was the girl-friend who first sees and is terrified by the apparition of The Headless Horsemen — and in so doing provided a cue for the only "blue" line I remember in any Hay comedy. Dialogue as such was never too important in their films either. Most of them featured at least one kind of double-talk routine (the schoolroom "That's a watt!" discussion in "Good Morning, boys" for example) and in "Oh Mr. Porter" there's a lengthy dissertation on summer and standard time — but the payoff is visual, not verbal. This is perhaps not just as well, since the speed of dialogue delivery, and the three contrastingly centered, evenly modulated American sentences, is what makes all that is being said. Some of the best lines are thrown away, anyway, as when Hay asks the ancient Jeremiah Harbottle if he's related to the equally ancient postman, and he replies "No, but we both go out with the same girl." This is one of several "Oh Mr. Porter" lines that may slip by unnoticed.

But like all good comedy, "Oh Mr. Porter" doesn't really rely on the spoken word. The dialogue is often very funny, even though it sometimes has the static back-and-forth quality of the music halls or radio. But basically it's all situation and sight-gag humour. It boils along at a fast clip, with elaborate moving tracks and zany locomotive chase. The miniature employed in these sequences are unusually expert. Incidentally, though Hay often wrote his own material and later was his own director, it's curious that the best and most thoroughly "British" of his comedies were directed by foreigners. The Frenchman, Marcel Varnel (who also directed "Chandu the Magician") made "Oh Mr. Porter", while "Windbag the Sailor" was directed by American William Beaudine.

Two brief, final, comments about the credits. I still think that the old Gainsborough trademark is one of the loveliest and most graceful trademarks used by any company. The song "Oh Mr. Porter" used behind the titles used to be a very popular and light-hearted British song; however it has since been taken over so much for advertising and commercial jingles that — like the William Tell Overture and The Perfect Song over here — one seldom hears it in its original form any more.