Sunday next, New Yorker Theatre, 88th & Broadway, at 9:30 a.m. - William Wellman’s "CHINATOWN NIGHTS" (1929) with Wallace Beery, Warner Oland and Florence Vidor, preceded by shorts.

Tuesday next: William Seiter’s "IN PERSON" (1935) with Ginger Rogers and George Brent; Gregory La Cava’s "MY MAN GODFREY" (1936) with Lombard and Powell.

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Tuesday June 7 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Through the World Wars with Spies and Counter-Spies.

"COTTAGE TO LET" (Gainsborough-U.S.A., 1941) Directed by Anthony Asquith
Produced by Edward Black; scenario by Anatone de Grumwald and O.C.
Orton from the play by Geoffrey Kerr; camera: Jack Cox; Art Direction, Vetchinsky; Musical Direction, Louis Levy. 9 reels.

With Leslie Banks, Alastair Sim, John Mills, Jeanne de Casalis, George Cole, Michael Wilding, Carla Lehmann, Frank Cellier, Muriel Aked, Muriel George, Hay Petrie, Catherine Lacey, Roddy Hughes, Peter Gawthorne, Hugh Burden, Wally Patch, Bretti O’Rourke.

Never released theatrically in the U.S., and given only very sparse tv showings, "Cottage to Let" is virtually unknown in this country, which is a pity for it is both one of Anthony Asquith’s most enjoyable films (from his "light" period, which also includes the still delightful and frothy "French Without Tears") and one of the most durable and least dated spy films from the earlier days of the war. Just why it received no U.S. release is something of a mystery, for it is certainly far superior to many mediocre British films of the period that did see U.S. distribution here, and while it is unquestionably British in its characterisations and humor, it is still a slick enough production with sufficient areas of popular appeal to have had at least art-house value over here.

In a loose sense, "Cottage to Let" is a continuation of the Hitchcock thrillers of the 30’s; it is a little more talkie than Hitchcock would have made it, and rather more bogged down (in the opening sequences) with rather stagey characters, but the continuing intertwining of menace and humour, and the indications of at least partial sympathy for the villains, are very much in the Hitchcock mould. Nearing the climax, as the pace quickens, it becomes even more Hitchcockian in the schoolboy-adventure manner of "The Man Who Knew Too Much", but the actual finale - bizarre, grim, and economically resolved with no wasted "wrap-up" footage - derives rather more from Frits Lang. I suspect that more than a little of the script comes not from the play but from the pen of O.C. Orton, an expert writer of British movie thrillers, many of them tongue-in-cheek, but tense and exciting none-the-less. "Cottage to Let" has two "mystery men" - a German agent, and a British counter-agent. Seasoned veterans won’t have too much trouble guessing who is who, but nevertheless the red herrings are bounced around rather neatly, and even include those old Mascot serial dodges of having a suspect make a furtive phone call, which is then cut to a shot of the German spies (presumably) receiving that same call! As became the tradition in the 30’s, Britain is here shown as being honeycombed with spies in the pay of foreign powers - all of them meek little shop-keepers or secretaries of little cultural groups. (I now have my doubts about the little film society I helped run during the war years - some of those program notes were pretty odd, and may well have contained code messages about that new RAF bomb sight!) However, if the British 5th column and the much-feared (in those days) parachuted German spies never quite lived up to their movie potential, at least there was some reason for concern and we British never went overboard quite as much as Hollywood did in all those “B”s with John Carradine and William von Brincken carrying out wholesale espionage and sabotage all over the U.S. "Cottage to Let" is written and played with humour, and really exceptionally well cast. Leslie Banks, before the days of Jack Hawkins’ eminence, is obviously the stalwart bulwark of the British Empire (which is
why he was so effective as the spy and traitor in Cavalcanti's "Went The Day Well?"). and Alastair Sim as always is a delight. George Cole, only 16 when he made this film, promptly went into the RAF until 1947, hence his apparent overnight change from boy to man in his next films. Catherine Lacey, the phoney nun from "The Lady Vanishes" is up to her old tricks again here, and there's an amusing performance from Jeanne de Casalis, probably new to most of you. A dithering Billie Burke type comedienne, she was best known for her radio and music hall shits (as "Mrs Feather") and she made but few films. For some reason, critical reaction to the film was not enthusiastic, and it was considered a letdown from the successful play. It was coupled on one of the Rank circuits with another film considered a disappointment - Hal Roach's zany comedy "Road Show", and this light-hearted double-bill proved one of the most popular combinations of the 40's.

Intermission

"BRITISH AGENT" (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by Michael Curtiz; screenplay by Laird Doyle from the book by Bruce Lockhart; dialogue director, Frank Macdonald; camera: Ernie Haller; art director, Anton Grot; Technical Advisor, Nicholas Kobliansky; 9 reels

"British Agent" is from one of Curtiz' most versatile and productive periods, and is a truly handsome and lavish production, so it's rather a surprise that it doesn't work. I think the reasons are two-fold: first its disconcerting point of view, and secondly its deadly seriousness. Firstly, it's rather difficult to have too much sympathy for the British agent -- or his American cohorts -- who are clearly interfering and diverting another nation's affairs for reasons of their own country's politics. The underhanded tricks that Leslie Howard and co. get up to are the kind of things that we are now told only those sneaky Communists perpetrate! Now this would still work if the film were honestly trying to depict espionage as the rat-race it undoubtedly is, but "British Agent" tries to have it both ways, giving us a lush soap-opera romance at the same time, almost redeeming itself with some guts towards the end, and then giving in completely to "popular appeal" and selling out what integrity it has. Thus it's neither "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold" or at the other extreme, "Mata Hari". Nevertheless, if one can forgive the plot contrivances, overlook the surprisingly bad performance from Leslie Howard, and ignore the fact that Warner's old brewery set (used in "Doorway to Hell" and other gangster movies) doesn't really look at home in Moscow, the film has a lot in it of real interest. The sets often have a von Sternbergian elegance and size, and the number of them -- and the really generous populating of the crowd scenes -- give the film an unexpected opulence, which is further helped by Ernie Haller's fine camerawork. Too, Curtiz has obviously studied Eisenstein's "Ten Days That Shook the World", and at times the compositions, the handling of crowds in mass action scenes, and of course the superficially-copied cutting, make it look as though matches had been duped from the Russian film -- just as "Mother" looked as though it had duped big chunks of "Way Down East"! Curtiz also seems to have learned from Eisenstein's very stylised handling of Kerensky -- although the character itself is somewhat simplified and handled with an opposite stylisation. Basically a bad film I suppose, "British Agent" nevertheless is a very interesting and enjoyable one and a further example -- if one were needed -- of what cinematic life Curtiz could bring to unpromising material. In any case, it's always nice to sit back and watch Ivan Simpson behaving in his best first-eleven manner as the British Consulate is sacked, and Leslie Howard nostalgically recalling "...a quiet village in Sussex....".

---- William K. Everson ----