Tuesday July 19th: "Farrebique" (1945), Georges Rouquier's lovely pastorale French classic, unseen for far too long. And shorts.

July 12 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

An evening of wild melodrama from the 30's.

We make no bones about tonight's program being a singularly unimportant one, and even a kind of "fill-in" show, occasioned by the fact that I am away for several weeks and all the programs had to be prepared well in advance, from prints already on hand. But taken in the right spirit, and anticipating a kind of representative 42nd St. double-bill of a quarter-of-a-century ago, we think you'll have fun with tonight's two films.

"AIR HAWKS" (Columbia, 1935) Directed by Albert Rogell; screenplay by Griffin Jay and Grace Neville; camera: Henry Freulich; 7 reels.

"Air Hawks" is vintage Saturday matinee fare from the 30's, the kind of serial-like little "B" that Columbia, Universal and Paramount turned out en masse. It's that grand old plot about the big air-line trying to run the little air-line out of business, with a hidden mastermind (whose identity won't be too hard to guess, despite the presence of such time-honored red herrings as Niles Welch and Guy Usher) and best of all, a death ray that somehow manages to operate unseen and unheard as it brings planes toppling out of the skies. Dear old Edward Van Sloan is the crazy scientist at the controls, and he has the time of his life -- backed by those thick-rimmed glasses and low-key lighting -- making up for all his altruism in combatting Dracula, the Mummy and the Frankenstein monster. Films like "Air Hawks" never quite deliver the goods as they should -- there's always a little penny-pinching and cheating, and "Air Hawks", no exception, does run out of steam a little towards the end. But after all, if they realised their full potential they wouldn't be "B"s any more -- and on a more pretentious and bigger scale level, they wouldn't work as well, as witness "The Sun Never Sets". "Air Hawks" is professionally made, with slick direction, a good cast, and polished production values; it's the kind of film that more than pleased us, within its category, back in the 30's, and thus it is unfair to apply more exacting standards to it today.

--- Intermission ---

"THE SUN NEVER SETS" (Universal, 1939) Produced and directed by Rowland V. Lee

Screenplay by W.P. Lipscomb from an original story by Jerry Horwin and Arthur Fitz-Richard; Camera: George Robinson; 9 reels

Hollywood maintained a surprisingly affectionate attitude towards British tradition and colonialism right through the 30's, with such films as "One More River", "Cavalcade", "Lives of a Bengal Lancer", "Charge of the Light Brigade", and so on. But "The Sun Never Sets" is something special. It is the only film I know of in which a British colonial gentleman (the great Basil Rathbone, out of his element, in a role he was not meant for) is the good guy, and the bad guy is Edward Van Sloan, who is on a mission from outer space to destroy the British empire in Africa. The film is a splendid example of what can be done with a serious and an almost serious theme.
"Brigade", "Wee Willie Winkie", "Gunga Din" and - even on the "B" level - "Storm Over Bengal", a group that quite overshadowed Britain's own back-patting via "The Drum", "Rhodes of Africa" and "The Four Feathers". "The Sun Never Sets" was one of Hollywood's last vintage Union-Jack epics, since the war was upon us and Kipling and Mason were replaced, somewhat stickily, by Jan Struther and Alice Duer Miller. Instead of a handful of whites holding the line at the Khyber Pass, we had "Mrs Miniver" and "The White Cliffs of Dover" instead. Hollywood's heart was in the right place, but sentiment replaced showmanship, and as Aubrey Smith reminded us in picture after picture, "There's no room for sentiment, lad!"

"The Sun Never Sets" is a good example of a picture that just got too big for its breeches. The cast includes just about all the paid-up members of Hollywood's British colony, not forgetting Douglas Walton, that essential weak link in the chain who sweated and minced his way through British history in "Mary of Scotland", "Shack", "Mutiny on the Bounty" and so many others, never quite making the grade or measuring up to the standards required of him. All of the old stalwarts of the aristocracy are here - Smith and Mary Forbes and those devoted souls of the lower classes, Ivan Simpson and Sidney Bracey. Rathbone again tends to ham it up a trifle, but Fairbanks is appropriately dashing. Lionel Atwill does rather tend to let down the side, since he is a munitions magnate manipulating World World Two, but since he clearly plays a Russian and not an Englishman, he can be forgiven. The dialogue given to all these staunch upholders of Empire is an overblown delight throughout, though nothing can ever quite equal the Home Office's dismay in learning that one of their consuls' wives is to have a baby and their determination to bring her home, since of course no woman (no English woman that is!) can have a baby on the Gold Coast! Added to all this is an imposing foreword, and much martial and inspiring background music. The script, the advertising hardened to remind us, was by W.P. Lipscomb - who had been brought over to Hollywood to work on this film as a reward for his sterling work on Shaw's "Pygmalion".

The trouble with "The Sun Never Sets" is that it never really rises to the occasion. Rowland V. Lee, an interesting director whose career somewhat parallels James Whale's, though it goes back much further (into the silents) and lacks Whale's taste and style, always manages to get the very most out of a budget. The cast here is a big help. The interior sets are handsome. The exteriors are convincing and effective, but actually quite cheap, all of them set up on Universal's back lot. The press book promises "...the pounding sweep of expanding Empire...women robbed of their mates..." and the ads are liberally interspersed with battle scenes, charging Arabs, hundreds of horsemen and what have you -- none of which appears in the film. Basically, "The Sun Never Sets" is just "Air Hawks" with pretensions -- a serial-like meller with Lionel Atwill the only one with the wit to recognize that, and play it accordingly. Not slow, but surprisingly lacking in physical action until the climactic episodes, "The Sun Never Sets" either needed genuine spectacle to match its own pretentions -- or to have been reduced in size to its proper thick-air proportions. Nevertheless, by virtue of its cast and dialogue it's a diverting trifle certainly, and a fairly good object lesson in how to turn a "B" script into an "A" property. Incidentally, Universal were to use the spectacular climactic bombing raid in many a subsequent "B" or serial, never being phased by the fact that clearly marked British planes are involved. In the serial "Adventures of the Flying Cadets", one of the heroes rushes into an American aerodrome asking for help in disposing of a nest of German and Jap spies. The American officer in charge is saddened and contribe; he just sent his boys out on a mission. But then he brightens! Of course! Those new RAF bombers waiting to be ferried over to England; the very thing! And once again the planes -- almost as overworked as Richtofen's flying circus from "Hell's Angels" -- take the air, and the stock shot vault has saved the day once more.