Tonight's two films are casually inter-related. Both are British films in what one might loosely term the "Big Caper" genre - studies in a specific crime, its planning, its execution and its failure, one as a thriller, the other as a comedy. Neither were given theatrical releases in this country, and their only showing has been a sparse tv exhibition, although I believe that "A Prize of Arms", obviously the more important of the two films, has yet to have its first tv exposure in New York.

"A FIRE HAS BEEN ARRANGED" (Twickenham Films, 1935)
Directed by Leslie S. Hiscott; produced by Julius Hagen; Scenario by Michael Barringer and H. Fowler Sears from an original story by H. Fowler Sears and James A. Carter; Camera: Sidney Flythe; Musical numbers by Bud Flanagan, Horatio Nicholls, Maurice Sigler, Al Goodhart and Al Hoffman; dances staged by Buddy Bradley; 7 reels

Although certainly not one of the important British comedies of the 30's, and not to be compared with the more elaborate vehicles of George Formby, Jack Hulbert, Will Hay, Jack Buchanan and Tom Walls, "A Fire Has Been Arranged" is a surprisingly fresh and entertaining comedy. It is fast, unpredictable, tuneful, and zips along with energy and a sprightly original score. Most of the British comedies of the period that were not star vehicles for the top-liners mentioned above were pretty bad - viz some of the Sandy Powell and Leslie Fuller slapstickers - and for a fairly unambitious independent effort, "A Fire Has Been Arranged" is remarkably successful. Incidentally, if the plot seems familiar, it is probably because you saw the remake (of sorts) a few years ago, now reshaped to give Robert Morley (in the old Alastair Sim role) greater prominence.

The team of Flanagan and Allen may be new to most of you. A musical hall team that combined fast and disjointed patter with sentimental songs, they entered films in 1932, made a handful of films together, but scorched their greatest success (in the music halls as well as in movies) when they combined with the other comedy teams - Naughton and Gold, Nervo and Knox - to form a group known as the Crazy Gang. None of the six comedians were terribly funny as individuals and they depended largely on their material, but as a group they emerged rather like a combination of The Marx Brothers and Olsen and Johnson. Their first and best movie were marvellously insane - "O.K. For Sound", a plotless satire of the film business and "Al's Button Atlantic" (in which the hero and heroine are eaten by a bear)! Their final films, made during the war years - "The Frozen Limits" and "Gasbags" - were more traditional slapstick and not as good. Flanagan and Allen returned to making comedies on their own and the other two teams vanished from films. However, the Crazy Gang has frequently been reunited on the London stage for "farewell" shows.

As an early film effort, "A Fire Has Been Arranged" doesn't show Flanagan and Allen at their best - but it does show them in good and typical form. There are a number of the crossed-talk routines that pre-date the Abbott and Costello "Who's on First?" act, and also patter acts in which information is allotted only by a labyrinth exploration of the English language, somewhat akin to those Marx Brothers episodes in which Chico tries to deduce the meaning of Harpo's pantomime. Much of it is undoubtedly corny, but it has vigor and a genuine music hall flavor, and it works more often than it fails. Too, despite the rapidity of much of the patter, both Flanagan and Allen are - or should be - easily understood by American audiences, though one does need to pay attention! Odd jokes have Jewish connotations, rare in British comedies, and certain sight gags betray a knowledge of similar Bennett and Roach gags from the silents.

There's only one traditional Flanagan and Allen number, saved for the finale, but there are plenty of other sprightly song numbers with charmingly absurd British chorus girls doing their best to measure up to Busby Berkeley standards, Alastair Sim mugs well, somewhat in the Groucho Marx manner, and if there seems to be a little too much of Bobb Walton (the head of the store fire brigade) it should be explained that he was a very popular British radio comic of the time. His stage and radio act of Fr. Muddlecomb, besuiced rural magistrate, is transferred pretty much intact to his screen role here.

With its mixture of patter, songs and slapstick, surprisingly slick production values, and some good exterior locations - the Brocklands racing track for
example, and some pleasing British village and rural scenes - "A Fire Has Been Arranged" offers a great deal of variety and change of pace. Leslie Hiscott, who directed, has a long history in British silent and sound films, including the Arthur Wontner Sherlock Holmes films, though he never turned out a really outstanding film, he had a good record for serviceable and above average programmers. Twickenham Films under Julius Nagen made some very ambitious independents in the 30's, including such films as "The Wandering Jew" and "The Lost Chord"; indeed they spent far more on their films than their market could return, hence their eventual demise. Twickenham Studios still function however - one of the dozen equivalents of Fort Lee in the London suburbs - although mainly on unimportant "B" films such as the current "Cut of the Fog".

- Intermission -

"A PRIZE OF ARMS" (British Lion-Bryanston, 1961)
Directed by Cliff Owen; Produced by George Maynard; Scenario by Paul Ryder from an original story by Nicholas Roeg and Kevin Kavanagh; Camera - Gilbert Taylor and Gerald Gibbs; Editor, John Jimpson; Special Effects by Jim Hole; Art Directors, Jim Kmonohan and Bernard Sarron; music by Robert Sharpless. 10 reels.

Another in the group of films exploring in minute detail the planning and execution of a "caper" - a genre that really established itself with "The Asphalt Jungle", and followed up with such films as "Bififi", "The Killing" and "Payroll" - "A Prize of Arms" is unavoidably somewhat familiar in design, though it is quite fresh in content. It's such a taut, well-done and genuinely suspenseful thriller that its turnout for U.S. release is hard to fathom. Admittedly, its selling angles are slight. The names are not big, and there is no sex to exploit. Further, it is very British, and a full enjoyment of some of the suspense angles (the plot involves the robbing of an Army payroll) depends to some extent on a familiarity with, or at least an understanding of, some of the routines of British Army procedure. So perhaps as a former British Army inductee, I have a slight advantage over most Huffsians. Still, it's so expertly done, the methodically paced opening building to a long climax of razor-edged tension, that it's surprising that someone didn't see some U.S. value in it, even if hacked down to second-feature length. Fortunately, though a little scratched in spots, our print is 100% complete, and this may well be the only such unimpaired showing that it will get in the States.

A word of thanks to Charlie Shibuk for keeping the society shows going while I have been in Europe over the past month. Although there on business, I did manage a certain amount of pillage, plunder and loot, and the results will be on view at the Huff in our next 3-month period, from September to November. The full schedule will go out around August 23rd, so I'll just say now that it'll be one of our most fruitful sessions, and will include a lot of really rare material - British, French, American - from 1919 through 1936. One of the most intriguing items is a condensed but still substantial version of First National's first British production - Graham Cutts' "Confetti", a 20's film with Jack Buchanan that looks like a collaboration between Griffith, von Sternberg, Borzage and Georges Méliès. Another item - the 1919 "Beast of Slumber Mountain", with pre-"Lost World" dinosaurs et al, including a lovely Tyrannosaurus Rex, staged by Willis O'Brien of course!

- Wm. K. Everson -