Next Tuesday, August 23rd: "THE SILENT MAN" (1917), a good typical vintage Ince western, directed by and starring William S. Hart; and "FIORE" (1913), an exceptionally interesting Italian "primitive", forerunner of "Judex" and the other French serials.

August 16 1936
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two British films by Erich Pommer

Erich Pommer, who died last May, was one of the most remarkable and prolific producers (and occasional director) that the movies have ever given us. Most prominently associated with the great German classics of the 20's of course, he also worked in Hollywood during the silent period ("Barbed Wire", "Hotel Imperial") and on the later talkies ("They Knew What They Wanted"); he worked in France, and during the thirties especially, he worked in England. His "Fire Over England", made for Korda, we'll be showing in a few weeks. His long association with Laughton never really terminated, and for many years their Mayflower Pictures Corp., owned many properties that they planned, ultimately, to produce - among them a projected remake of William K. Howard's "White Gold". Pommer's imprint was not on his films to the extent that you could look at any or all of them and say instantly that this was a Pommer production; his imprint was on them in the sense that he was a creative and not a ledger-book producer who considered his function finished when he was able to hand a final script and an assembled cast over to a director. Unobtrusively he supplied ideas, the right men for the right job, gave his craftsmen a free hand. It is no coincidence surely that many directors turned in work under Pommer that they were never able to match under another producer, or on their own, the classic example of course being that of E.A. Dupont and "Variety". Tonight's two films complement one another rather well in that one shows us Pommer solely and officially at the helm as both producer and director, while the other shows us his - shall we say "guidance"? - of a competent but never really inspired director, whose best work had previously lain in star-vehicle comedies.

"ST. MARTIN'S LANE" (U.S. title, "Sidewalks of London")
A Pommer-Laughton-Mayflower Production for Paramount release; 1939
Producer: Pommer; Director: Tim Whelan; Original story and screenplay by Clemence Dane; Camera: Jules Kruger; Musical direction, Nuir Matheson; music by Arthur Johnson, lyrics by Eddie Pola; Dance director, Philip Buchel; editors, Hugh Stewart and Robert Hamer; 3 reels

"St. Martin's Lane" is a curious film in many ways; it has echoes of Milestone's "Hallelujah I'm a Pum" and even more marked anticipations of Chaplin's "Limelight". One can also easily envisage it as a silent German vehicle for Jamieson, and indeed many individual shots - admittedly taken out of context - offer only samplings of that breed who are relatively talented and at least moderately entertaining. The tragedy of London buskers - be they comedians, singers or the escape artists who unravel themselves from sacks, chains and locks - is that they are never really wanted, and they know it. They perform to the queues waiting outside theatres and cinemas (London still does have such queues, although less spectacular ones than in the old days) - people waiting to pay money to see entertainment of their own choice, and who would much rather be left alone with their papers or their conversation. The buskers' acts are rarely watched, thus they have to be noisy so that they can be heard; their captive audiences pay up, if they pay up at all, more out of embarrassment than from appreciation, and they pay up unwillingly because as soon as one collection is over, there’ll be another unwanted act from further buskers, another collection, and so on. The shabbiness of all this, and the humiliation on both sides, is caught rather well by some of "St. Martin's Lane". Dominating the whole film is an incredibly realistic set that reconstructs perfectly one of the key little theatrical alley-ways just off Leicester Square; so beautifully is it constructed that were it not for the perfectly controlled lighting and camera movements, one would suspect much of it as being authentic location material.
Although rather more polished than many British films of its period, the film is neither markedly British nor German in its technique. There are some rather interesting uses of direct cuts which again stress that the New Wavers did a lot of borrowing from the Old Masters; and there’s one delightful moment when the Teutonic influence takes over. Chasing Vivien Leigh out of Leicester Square, Laughton catches up with her, seconds later, in a deserted street with a German house right out of "The Golem" -- and at a rough guess, he’d have had to chase her several miles, at least to the environs of Kensington, to find such a bizarre location! Laughton is fine, Leigh seems superficial at first, fooling us all since the part ultimately calls for such an interpretation, and Tyrone Guthrie manages to be as intrusive and annoying as always, although some of the New American Cinema boys might consider him the re-discovery of the age. Odd points of minor interest: some publicity skills of Leigh are borrowed from her "Dark Journey", and some shots of a production number are rather curiously matted in, indicating that it may have been planned as a big number on its own, not used, and salvaged by being slotted in as "background" and "establishing" material.

*Vessel of Wrath* (U.S. title, "The Beachcomber") 1938
A Pommer-Laughton-Mayflower Production for Paramount release; Produced and directed by Erich Pommer; screenplay by Bartlett Cormack from the novel by Somerset Maugham; camera: Jules Kruger; Music: Huir Mathieson; Editor: Robert Hamer; 8 reels

 Coincidentally like "St. Martin's Lane", "Vessel of Wrath" calls to mind two other (in part) quite similar films -- another Laughton film, "The Tuttles of Tahiti", and -- even more of a parallel -- Huston's "The African Queen". I haven't read Maugham's original, but I suspect that this adaptation follows it both faithfully and reverently. It has the occasional stiff-look of the too literal translation from one medium to another, and certainly -- to its credit -- it overlooks the many opportunities for showmanship by distorting drama into melodrama -- something that the Technicolor remake certainly didn't overlook. But despite being a little "difficult" at first -- like many a good book -- it is an engaging film that begins to flow rather easily, and rewarding, once one has given it a chance. Its direction by Pommer himself is a little old-fashioned but not obstinately so. It starts with an iris. Soon after there is a wild chase down a native street in which, in terms of logic, time lapse and distance, the cutting is all wrong. It is edited (and shot) as though it were a silent film, in which time could be suspended or prolonged by the insertion of a title, or a cutaway. But thereafter, "technique" relaxes a little. The film is neither old-fashioned nor modern; it lets the story -- and the players -- take over almost completely, and under the ensuing circumstances, this seems by far the wisest approach. Overlapping dialogue -- not as cunningly constructed as Orson Welles might have done it, ensuring that we heard what he wanted us to hear -- sometimes makes it a little difficult to hear all the lines, and the fact that this is an old (though very good) 16mm print doesn't help that aspect either. But on the whole it's a rather lovely, lazy vignette of a film -- less showy and dramatic than "St. Martin's Lane", but perhaps a little more satisfying. Robert Newton, here in a key supporting role, appropriately played the Laughton role in the remake, while Donald Sinden equally effectively took his role. Glynnis Johns however was hardly as felicitously re-cast in the Elsa Lanchester role, though she managed to squirm rather nicely when about to be trampled by elephants -- an episode of sensationalism conspicuously absent from this version.

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William K. Everson