Tuesday September 27th 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

British Musicals of the 30's

Let me hasten to add, after such an imposing program-heading, that tonight's program is not in any way designed as a comprehensive coverage of British musical films, in the fairly recent past, we have shown representative work of Jessie Matthews, George Formby, Planagan and Allam in an attempt to duplicate the work of Busby Berkeley the fairly elaborate production numbers dreamed up by the imported Larry Ceballas. Tonight's program is a cross-section if you like, but nothing more definitive than that.

NOTE: There has been a slight change in the makeup of tonight's program. In response to a show of hands at last week's screening, it has been decided to show the Richard Tauber film in its entirety, rather than in excerpt form -- there being enough people interested in seeing it in toto and being aware that it is not a very good film, just to justify it. However, those who have seen it before may prefer not to see it a second time, so it has been scheduled last on the program. This of course will enable those so inclined to see the key film of the evening and beat a hasty retreat before the hat is passed around at intermission -- but in view of the cost of procuring "This'll Make You Whistle", we hope that such undignified exits will be at a modest minimum.

"COMMAND PERFORMANCE" (GFD, 1936) Director: Maurice Elvey; EXCERPTS With Arthur Tracy, Lilian Palmer.

Arthur Tracy's vogue as "The Street Singer" prompted a brace of very popular British vehicles in the 30's, in one of which he went from rags to riches, and in the other - "Command Performance" - reversed the procedure by being cast as a runaway movie star, hiding out with gypsies to avoid the never-ending pressure of concerts and public appearances. Both were pleasantly naive little films, making good use of the English landscape, and generally following the old Jolson format of songs, sentiment and a sock finale. Our excerpts include one typical "Sonny Boy" type song -- but not the lugubrious climax, which even out-slobbered AI at his worst. (Tracy, singing at a Command Performance, belts out a ballad to a dying tot -- and then gallops off-stage after having first explained to the King and Queen, and gotten their Royal Blessing!)

"THIS'LL MAKE YOU WHISTLE" (Herbert Wilcox-United Artists, 1935) Produced and directed by Herbert Wilcox; based on the Jack Buchanan musical show, with book by Guy Bolton and Fred Thompson, and lyrics by Sigler, Goodhart and Hoffman; scenario by Guy Bolton and Fred Thompson; photography - P.A. Young; musical director, George Windeatt; Editing: Merrill White Ltd. 7 reels

With Jack Buchanan, Elsie Randolph, Jean Gillie, Harry Kendall, David Hutcheson, Madge Hope, Anthony Holles, Marjorie Brooks, Bunnie Pain, Milli Hood, Scott Harold, Irene Vera.

Producer, actor-singer-dancer, writer and theatre manager Jack Buchanan is best known in this country for an early talkie - Lubitsch's "Monte Carlo" -- and a very late one, "The Band Wagon". (One of his few pre-talkie films, "Confetti", will be shown in condensed form in a few weeks). He was initially and primarily a stage performer, as his many films of the 30's and 40's generally reflected the light froth of his theatrical work. His stage personality, Jack Buchanan is facile and clever, but not as appealing as Jack Hulbert; there is a certain artificiality to his work which smacks too much of the stage. But all the better, whatever how well he is directed and his directors have ranged from Lubitsch to Rene Clair he always seems to be playing to a live audience and not to the movie camera. However, most of his films were trifles like "When Knights Were Bold". "Yes Mr. Brown" and "That's A Good Girl", the limitation is hardly a serious one. His films usually had sparkle, variable (but usually good) production values and snappy scores, and on the whole they date far less than other similar British musicals of the same period. "This'll Make You Whistle" was directed personally by Herbert Wilcox, which automatically puts its into a higher budgetary bracket than usual, and the care shows. The film has pace,
surprisingly elaborate sets, and a handful of charming songs — with the really delightful "I'm in a dancing mood" an especial standout. In its relaxed manner and overall plot and style, "This'll Make You Whistle" is remarkably like the same year's Astaire-Rogers entry, "Top Hat" — but it is clearly an accidental overlapping, for Buchanan's movie style and format had been clearly established well before the first Astaire-Rogers film. There's a rather surprising running joke about a black baby -- race gags were rare in British films of the 30's -- but otherwise the humour is gentle and unspectacular, playing second fiddle to plot-line and music. The print is rather well-worn, with more splices and jump cuts that we would normally deem acceptable, but under the circumstances we were lucky to get it. No print exists in this country and tonight's print is the best of only two or three that seem to exist in England. When we acquired it, a huge chunk was missing in the first reel — the hero's first meeting with the heroine (lovely Jean Gillie, who later toughened up for Hollywood's "Decoy" in the 50's) and his serenading her in a canoe. By devious means we were able to track down and dupe the canoe scene and splice it into this print; still missing alas is the brief scene where Jack meets Jean. Otherwise, despite occasional rocky condition, the print is complete.

- Intermission -

"THE GANG SHOW" (Herbert Wilcox Productions, 1937) Director: Alf Goulding
With Ralph Reader; EXCERPTS

The Boy Scout "Gang Shows" of the 30's were tremendous annual hits in England, and also in Chicago, but the one film built around them — though a financial success — hardly came up to expectations. Goulding was a hack director, and the money allotted to script and production values seemed very slim. And of course, there's a limit to what you can do with a bunch of beefy Boy Scouts — even overhead shots, a la Busby Berkeley, didn't help very much; Gang Show maestro Ralph Reader seemed to be trying to sell himself too hard as a lovable movie personality, and a lot of the numbers were quite tedious. We have NOT included the protracted versions of "Mother Nachree" and "Danny Boy" offered by one wistful little boy scout! Poorly constructed, the film frequently interrupted good numbers for outmoded comedy bits and silly bits of plot. However, with all its failings, "The Gang Show" did offer some of the liveliest songs from the various stage shows — cheerful, hummable ditties like "Sitting on Top of the World", "There's a Song in My Heart" and "Great of the Wave", which are included in these excerpts.

"LAND WITHOUT MUSIC" (also known as "FORBIDDEN MUSIC" and "THAT'S MY BOY")
(1939) Directed by Walter Forde; an original screen operetta by Oscar Strauss; scenario by Fritz Roesch; art by Bob Robinson, L. Du Garde Peach, Ernest Betts, Marion Dix, Rudolph Bermaurer;
camera: John Boyle
6 reels
With Richard Tauber, Jimmy Durante, Diana Napier, June Clyde, Derrick de Marney, George Hayes, Esme Percy, George Carney, Evelyn Ankers.

An introductory title claims that this tale is based on an actual but conveniently little-known incident in history; but alas it makes it seem that Mr. Strauss also had a good movie memory, and was adept at what Hollywood terms the old switcheroo, for the whole thing seems like a shrewd reworking of "The Sign of the Cross". Sadly, there are no lions or orgies — but the musicians sub for the Christians, and are even betrayed to the soldiers in an underground cave that doesn't look unlike Mr. DeMille's! The film doesn't quite come off, mainly because it lacks the courage of its own convictions; having set out to make an operetta, it then decides to play it safe by making it against visa and obvious possibility. The singing of Durante, with too little for him to work with. Tauber's singing is kept in check in the early portions of the film, but once he lets loose there's no holding him, and Durante — who reputedly earned a higher salary than Tauber — is thankfully shunted aside. Tauber himself sings well in his traditional fashion, and is such a genial ham and obvious Teuton that one can't help thinking what a wonderful villain he'd have made for Fritz Lang. He even looks a little like Rudolph Klein-Rogge! In supporting roles, it's good to see again Diana Napier, frequently given more to screen and stage, and George Rauch (the hero's father), usually a villain, and the hero in the British version of "Emil and the Detectives", Evelyn Ankers, a minor-league British ingenue in those pre-"Wolf Man" days, decorates one sequence rather nicely as a comedy extra. Quite handsomely done, the film is no cheapskate — sets are elaborate, and there's no penny-pinching in the crowd scenes. But too much Durante prevents it being either top Tauber (like "Blossom Time") or top movie operetta (like "Viennese Nights"). Withal however, it's an entertaining minor work, and Tauber devotees will have no real cause for complaint.

--- William K. Everson ---