Tonight's two films coincidentally have a lot in common; both are British swashbucklers made in 1937, both represent amalgamations of British, American, and European talent, and both have been considered a kind of "last stand" for their respective directors. Undoubtedly, there are no more spectacular showmanship of their Hollywood counterparts, they nevertheless have a great deal of personal style and more than enough elements of genuine cinematic interest to offset the shortcomings in the traditional action departments.

UNDER THE RED ROBE (20th Century Figh, 1937) Directed by Victor Seastrom. Produced by Robert T. Kane; Screenplay by Lajos Biró, Philip Lindsay and J.L. Hudson from the novel by Stanley Weyman. Costumes by Georges Perinal and James Wong Howe; editor, James Clark; special effects, Ned Narry; musical score by Arthur Benjamin; dialogue director, Romney Brent; 6 reels.


Made earlier (and probably better) as a silent by Alan Crosland, this "Under the Red Robe" somewhat duplicates the flaws of "Dracula". After a marvelously visual opening, it bases its construction far more on the play by Edward Rose than on the original novel, and bogs down in telling its story via dialogue. Despite its promising foreword, it is anyway a historical romance rather than a swashbuckler, and the traditional trimmings of swordplay and chase, always held in check, continually hint of ultimate action which never materializes. Knowing in advance that nothing will really happen may help you to enjoy it more for what it is a splendid historical romance. Victor Seastrom's directorial comeback after many years — but also his directorial comeback — superbly visual (if oppressive) reels in the best Swedish tradition; black clouds, storms, silhouetted figures, beautiful closeups of ancient faces, had this mood been sustained, it might have been quite a movie; but even when it settles down to straightforward theatrics, plenty of interest remains. The sets are beautifully designed, and the film, like "Ophelia" "The Exile", is entirely studio-made, even the few simple woodland shots that could have been taken right outside the studio, being constructed on a sound stage. What they lack in conviction they certainly gain in consistency of visual style. Despite the collaboration of two great cameramen — Perinal and Howe — the visual style remains thoroughly that of Seastrom, and one wishes occasionally that he'd let himself go a little more. There's an outstanding piece of special effects trickery when Veidt clammers down from a high window — a scene that is totally unnecessary, but so beautifully designed that one wonders why it wasn't utilized to its full potential. Too, the film suffers from the lack of a nominal villain, and thus a lack of sustained conflict, although in a sense Raymond Massey — as Richelieu — fills this requisite role. As it is, however, and well-acted, "Under the Red Robe" is a curious but quite fascinating film.

"FIRE OVER ENGLAND" (Korda-London Films-United Artists, 1937) Directed by William K. Howard; produced by Erich Pommer; screenplay by Clemence Dane and Sergei Nolbandov from the novel by A.E.W. Mason; Camera: James Wong Howe; Art Direction, Edgar Reera; music by Richard Hageman, Neville Southall; special effects, Raymore and Nason; editor, John Dennis; 9 reels.

With Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Floren Finlay, Raymond Massey, lamblie Banks, Robert Newton, James Mason, Morton Selten, Tamara Desmi, Henry Oscar, Lawrence Hanray, Roy Russell, Howard Douglas, Cecil Mawer, Francis Deville; Graham Cheswright, George Thirwell, Corney Crain, Herbert Lomas, Donald Calthorp, Charles Carson, Robert Randell, Lynn Harding, Ralph Truman, Amy Veness.

An unofficial companion piece to Eisenstein's "Alexander Nevsky" in that it was a semi-propagandist warning to Hitler to keep hands-off, "Fire Over England" — with its tremendous talent roster behind and in front of the camera — should be a little better than it is. Since action here is an important part of the package, the lack of knowhow in the staging of duels and stunt scenes, and the disappointing "economy" of the final Armada scene, are drawbacks. But otherwise it is unadorned and still a most impressive film, all the more directed by Howard that one wonders again why his career spiralled so spectacularly thereafter, often recognizably a Pommer production, and always superbly lit and photographed by Howe. Despite its disappointing action content, it is not cheapie, and the lush sets and good crowd scenes are well up to Hollywood standards. Acting honors are taken by most of the veterans, with Massey, that latter-day Arliss, this time taking on Philip of Spain, charmingly disguising his inexperience and being happily just right for the role he plays. Leigh is young enough to be totally new, surprisingly unlit since it's his part is fairly important if small — makes a rather petulant minor villain. Again, there is no real villain — other than Philip! — We ---