ATOLL K (Fortezza Films and Les Films Sirius, France, 1952)

 Directors: Leo Joannon, John Berry. Produced by R. Elgar
 (Also known as "Robinson Crusoeoland"; US release in 1955
 under the title "Utopia"). 10 reels

With Laurel & Hardy, Suzy Delair, Max Elloy, Adriano Rimoldi.

Laurel & Hardy's final film was almost as much of a misfire as Chaplin's
"A King in New York", but nevertheless it was a brave attempt to do something
different, and in this respect at least was a far more worthwhile venture
than the majority of their later US releases. But it was one of those
productions foredoomed to failure by budget limitations, illness, and the
problems of communication between a multi-lingual crew. Much of its political
satire needed wit rather than visual humor, or better still a blending of both
in the Preston Sturges manner. John Berry, a good director of taut melodramas,
was clearly an unsuitable choice as the film's co-director, and commercially a
suicidal one for any film with a political tinge (even a comic one) since he
was then under a cloud in the US as one of the "unfriendly" Communists.

When the film finally was bought for the US, it received but scant distribution
and was cut by more than two reels, with - curiously - some of the funniest
sight gag sequences among the deleted footage. Further hurting the film was
the crucial absence of Stan Laurel in Laurel & Hardy roles, and most especially the
appealing physical appearance of Stan Laurel. He had been extremely ill prior
to and during production, and looked far older and sicker in this film than he
did more than ten years later, just prior to his death. The shock of his
appearance was such that his admirers just didn't feel like laughing at him,
and by the time this initial impact had worn off, it was too late to really
warm up the film. Nevertheless, the film has a certain charm (and some of the
spirit of Doug Fairbanks Jr.'s "Mr. Robinson Crusoe") and is quite undeserving of
the total obscurity into which it has been hurled. Lacking in much of the
standard Laurel and Hardy humor (wisely, for they looked too old for their
familiar knockabout routines to be appealing or even to have any point), it
substitutes elements of whimsy and satire. There is an abundance of sight
gags, but most of them are bizarre gags for immediate reaction, more
reminiscent of Buster Keaton than the carefully built routines of Laurel &
Hardy. One of the best of many Keaton-type gags has Laurel leaning out of
the porthole during a monster-sized hurricane to literally "pour oil on the
troubled waters" (the mountainous waves subside immediately)! The dialogue
is often quite pointed and amusing too, as in a good episode where Hardy
carves up the prime political posts of his new Republic, giving key positions
to himself and their three companions. All of the governmental posts have
been filled before Ollie gets to Stan, and poor Stan is heart-broken that he
has been ignored. But Hardy pacifies him with a magnificently diplomatic
line: "Why Stanley, you're The People!"

Despite their age and the uncertainty of their surroundings, Laurel & Hardy
keep the film going at a good clip. It falters only in the lengthy and tedious
outaway sequence to establish the Suzy Delair sub-plot, and in the climactic
episodes when the commentary on political wrangling and mob rule is
inevitably too heavy for the comedy balance to be maintained. However, the
film brightens up again with an unexpected black joke for the finale.

Our purpose in resurrecting "Atoll K" is not in the belief that it is an
unappreciated masterpiece, but rather in the conviction that it deserves at
least one showing in its complete form so that our Laurel & Hardy admirers
can at least form an accurate impression of it. Such an impression was
impossible from the mutilated theatrical release version in 1955, and while
it may possibly have been shown intact on tv, who can ever form a reliable
impression of anything from a tv showing?

"THANK, THE HAUNTED HOUSE" (British and Dominion-Gaumont British, 1932)

Directed by Tom Walls; Production supervisor, Herbert Wilcox;
Scenario by Ben Travers from his original play; camera, F.A. Young;
Music by Lew Stone; 8 reels

With Tom Walls, Ralph Lynn, Robertson Hare, Claude Hubert, Gordon James,
Hastings Lynn, Mary Brough, Beryl de Quertime, Marjorie Corbett, Evelyn
Bostock, Joan Brierly, Miles Malleson.
Although to the British stage what "The Gorilla" is to the American, "Thark" hardly exploits its horror background to anything like its full potential, and frankly is something of a museum piece today. I suspect that you will find it far more rewarding if you approach it as such, and as a piece of unfamiliar British film history, than purely as a comedy. This is quite probably its American premiere, though I make no specious claims on that point. Quite certainly the Walls-Lynn-Hare team, tremendously popular on the London stage and in British movies of the thirties, are almost completely unknown over here, though Walls is better known by virtue of his slick "Thin Man" type comedy thrillers of the later 30's, and his character roles in the 40's ("Johnny Frenchman", "Master of Bankdad" etc.).

The Aldwych Farces - the genre to which this film belongs - began on April 13 1922 when "Tons of Money" opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London. Producer-comedians Tom Walls and Leslie Henson saw possibilities in the show (which had been a failure for two years or more) and put it into the Shaftesbury for a limited run, expecting no more than a mild success to fall in before the next play. Unexpectedly, it was a bonanza - and in order to find another theatre for it, they moved to the Aldwych in the Strand, a White Elephant of a theatre that nobody wanted. It settled in there for a long run, made small fortunes for all concerned, and set up a pattern for Aldwych farces which was to remain unchanged until the 40's, and such plays as "Banana Ridge". By now, however, Ben Travers, who wrote the majority of the shows, was running out of new ideas, and the team of Ronald Hyam and Dorothy Leigh-Wood - who had taken over the succeeders of the light touch of Walls. Some of the better Aldwych farces almost all of them promptly (and theatrically) transferred to the screen, were "A Cuckoo in the Nest", "Duck Soup", "Pot Luck", "Rookery Nook" and "Plunder". They were considered somewhat risqué in their day, and parents usually steered their children away from them, partly because of the bedroom plotting, but more specifically because of Tom Walls, whose leering innuendos (and a slightly dubious off-screen reputation) and his rough-and-ready, careless use of the English language (wild swearing, use of bad grammar) made him a figure to inspire England's youth. Let it be added that England's youth couldn't care less, as they were much more interested in the more acrimonious comedies of Jack Hulbert and Will Hay. The characterisations in these farces rarely changed, and that was their charm. Walls was the mildly lecherous man-about-town, somewhat of a Groucho Marx; Ralph Lynn the silly-ass harassed hero, usually about to be married; and Robertson Hare the Butler, Vicar or uncle, frequently discovered in the heroine's room minus his trousers, always suspected, always innocent. His catch-phrase "O, calamity!" intoned in his deep solemn voice became a household word (or words!) in Britain of the thirties.

In fairness to the Aldwych genre as a whole, "Thark" has always been one of its more pedestrian representatives, and this kind of film - in 1932 - was not what England did best. Later, the film versions did pep up considerably, and "Pot Luck" - another haunted house affair - had much more vitality to it. However, as it stands "Thark" is a valuable and faithful record of a popular stage and screen trend in Britain in the early 30's. Some parts of it are still very funny indeed, though it has a curious structure - building up to its final climax in the middle, and then easing downhill again. The climax is disappointingly abrupt and inconclusive. However, along the way there are some very funny lines, dear old Mary Brough - an Aldwych reliable - and a marvellously sinister butler called Death. Directed in stolid, theatrical fashion by Tom Walls - even his groupings and exits smack of the stage - it is nevertheless never dull, and its very staginess is even an asset at times: No lines ever bumble over one another, and even allowing for time to sort out the various accents, there's time - with the optimistic stage pauses for laughter - to reach to each line of dialogue before the next one comes along. Ralph Lynn's rather enduring silly-ass Englishman, absent minded, but quite a stout fellow - wears rather surprisingly well, though it's unlikely that even the Huff will be able to promote a Ralph Lynn cult in New York! For the ladies, we commend a study of the various sets of pajamas that flit in and out of bedroom doors - some of them are quite breath-taking in their own unique way.

-William K. Everson-

NEW THREE MONTH SCHEDULES SHOULD BE READY FOR MAILING NEXT WEEK. WE HAVE A VERITABLE PLETHORA OF SILENTS THIS TIME, AND ALL OF MARCH WILL BE DEVOTED TO SILKRT PROGRAMS. "THE CRUISE OF THE JASPER B", ANNOUNCED FOR FEB. 26th., HAS HAD TO BE POSTPONED ONE WEEK, UNTIL MARCH 7th. REPLACING IT ON THE 26th. WILL BE A MUSICAL PROGRAM HEADED BY MAURICE CHEVALIER'S "THE WAY TO LOVE", WITH MUSICAL NUMBERS FROM "OLD MAN RHYTHM" (BUDDY ROGERS, BETTY GRABLE) AND OTHER EXCERPTS.