October 31 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Ealing Studios Program #5: wartime propaganda films

"ALL HANDS" (Ealing-MGM, 1940) Written and directed by John Paddy Carstairs; produced by Michael Balcon; 1 reel. With John Mills, Leslie MacGrath, Eliot Makeham, Gertrude Musgrave, Ralph Roberts, Annie Esmond, Carl Jaffe, John Wengraf, Olaf Olsen.

With its Hitchcockian twists and turns, this little melodrama was one of the best of the regular one-reelers with which the Ministry of Information supplied British theatres during the war. Some were straight documentaries, some purely comedies, others, like this one, quite stark and grim, and all got across their propagandist message - usually against careless talk - with solid production values and popular players, so that audiences rarely felt imposed upon. I remember seeing this particular one with DeMille's "North West Mounted Police", and its impression lingered well into the tedious opening reels of that opus.


"The Big Blockade" is a curious film indeed, and possibly a classic propaganda goof. Just why the Government thought it necessary to tell the public in such detail what the Office of Economic Warfare did is, in itself, debatable. And secondly, it was a puzzling (un-British) approach to try to blast one of the heavy-handed German propagandists by depicting the enemy as caish blunderers while putting oneself on the back with smart self-confidence and satisfaction. Using such well-known British comedy names as Alfred Drayton (of the Aldwych farces) and Robert Morley as Nazis had its amusing moments to be sure -- but the comedy was never hilarious enough for the film to succeed solely on that level, and the propagandising against German stupidity didn't seem to carry much weight when battles were still being lost and bombs were falling with considerable accuracy! Today of course its propaganda content hardly matters, and its documentary/reference value is outdated, so it remains as an academic curio, and on that level is quite interesting, not least in the utilisation of so much talent both in front of and behind the, cameras. One feels that they might have had fewer London and Lancashire voices masquerading as Germans, but one is inclined to forgive much for the sake of Robert Morley. His particular moment of glory comes when he is told that there is nowhere to put his latest victims as the concentration camps are all full. Chuckling gleefully, he bumbles "Well, build more concentration camps!" Presumably more money was spent on it than should have been laid out for a propaganda film, and so every attempt was made to sell its entertainment value in an effort to recoup some of it. Big ads stressed the stars and every avenue of appeal, but the film got only mild reviews, and disappeared quite quickly after its initial circuit release.


"Went the Day Well?" is I think not only one of Cavalcanti's finest works, but also one of the best and least-appreciated British films of World War Two. Rural England is attractively photographed, and its day-to-day life realisticly evoked. For once the "gays" do not become caricatures, and while it seems broadly Hitchcockian in theme, in style it is as much related to Bumel. In a sense, it is an updated equivalent of the World War One anti-Hun atrocity movies. It is more restrained, more sensible, and has an amiable sense of humor - but the aim is the same. Whereas before the Hun appeared as an outright beast, here he appears initially beneath a veneer of civilization, which is
only gradually stripped away - to reveal the same beast beneath! To its credit, the film realises the obviousness of its device, and counters with sly humor. Muriel George, trying to soft-soap a German, tells him she doesn't believe all that propaganda about Germans impaling babies on bayonets. "Babies on bayonets?" muses the German, "what would be the advantage?". Made at the height of the invasion scare in England, the film propagandised for vigilance, against careless talk, and added the morale-booster of having the tale in flashback after the victorious winning of the war. Like so many British films of the period, and especially the wholly or partially Government-sponsored ones, it seems to suggest that England was a honeycomb of 5th column activity. The most aristocratic Etonian would be in direct touch with Berlin via a short-wave radio hidden behind his copy of "The Tatler", and pub-keepers, tobacconists and cinema managers formed an incredible network of espionage, much of which is presumably now lying dormant awaiting another Fuhrer to launch them into action. If the intention was to make one suspicious of one's neighbor it didn't work, because no normal Englishman really likes his neighbor anyway, and automatically suspects him without Government prodding. But once the mystery is cleared up there is unique solidarity. The Germans, no longer forced to masquerade as urbane Britons, scowl, revert to guttural accents, make a point of calling each other "Mueller" or "Schmidt", and growl an "Ach!" whenever anything goes wrong. And the British come through true-blue all down the line - aristocratic dowager and humble post-mistress both lay down their lives without a moment's hesitation, and the manor-house maid - called Bridget of course - gallantly keeps everyone's spirits up by serving tea under fire. If one tends to levity over such an excellent film, it is perhaps because WW 2 is now both ancient history and (alas) small potatoes, so that one can regard it far more as entertainment than propaganda. So much of the old Hitchcock (and the old Launder-Gilliat situations and lines) is absorbed into the film - messages for help scrawled on the bottoms of eggs, German agents smiling smugly as they listen to an off-key radio rendition of "There'll Always Be an England", a little boy running through the woods to bring off a last-minute rescue; but if there's a dominance of Hitchcock influence, there's at least a hint of Cavalcanti's old French avant-garde stamping grounds too. There are moments of incredible savagery which happen when one least expects them, and to the most unlikely people. And the final battle scenes are a strange mixture of jingoistic "indomitable Brittenia" - ordinary seaman Frank Lawton holding off the Hun with a tommy-gun - and plain unvarnished documentary austerity.

From its "Our Town" opening through its building of suspense paralleled by laughter, it's an odd film, yet an intensely powerful one, and one that seems better with each successive viewing. However, it isn't difficult to see why it was not a success. Neither critics nor public liked it. Perhaps the former rejected it for being too much of a thriller, and for being unpersuasive on a subject then considered of prime concern. Metropolitan audiences had no point of identification; they were less concerned with infiltration by spies than with mass bombings. And to rural audiences, the war was too cut and dried for them to take it seriously. To them, the enemy was on the front line - and if he appeared in England, it would be openly, dangling from a parachute. Complicated Fritz Lang schemes like the one in "Went The Day Well?" were beyond their ken -- and perhaps not without reason. Certainly the authentic uncouth aloofness and synthetic but polite heartlessness displayed by Basil Sydney et al could never be convincingly duplicated by any German spy. He'd probably start chatting with his co-passenger in a train, and they'd know right away that he was a foreigner.

One word of explanation concerning the Germans' determination to stop the ringing of church bells. In England during the war, church bells were banned, their use being preserved solely as a warning of invasion. Needless to say, more than one British comedy ("Hi Gang!" etc.) had the bells set off by accident, and the whole country thereby mobilised.

When we last ran "Went the Day Well?", some five years ago, we had an excellent print that was unfortunately not available for tonight's show. The print we are showing is a little below our normal standards of acceptance, with splices that cut into odd lines of dialogue. But it is complete, and improves as it goes along.

Wm. K. Everson