November 14, 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"TWENTY-ONE DAYS" (London Films-Columbia, 1939) Produced and directed by Basil Dean; screenplay by Basil Dean and Graham Greene from the story "The First and the Last" by John Galsworthy; Camera: Jan Stallick; musical score by John Greenwood; Settings by Vincent Korda; editor: Chas. Crichton; 8 reels


I haven't read the Galsworthy story on which this film is based, but it has the same obsession with conflicts between moral and legal guilt which characterises so many of his works (including such film translations as "One More River" and "Escape") so presumably it is a reasonably faithful adaptation - except possibly for the climax. Unfortunately this climax can't be discussed without ruining story and suspense values, so I can only say that while it seems somewhat of a compromise today, in 1939, when the production code influence was very much at its height, even on British films, it was quite a mature way to end the film. That the climax doesn't entirely work is due to a conflict in audience sympathies; all of our sympathies are with Vivien Leigh, practically none with Laurence Olivier (due partly to the character, more largely due to his mannered and self-indulgent playing) so that no thoroughly satisfying ending - from an audience point of view - seems possible. Otherwise the film holds up well however; despite the Korda production crew, it has far more the "look" of one of Basil Dean's earlier Ealing films, but it is well-written, extremely well played (Olivier apart) and the story itself is very holding. The mechanics of British justice (swifter than the US equivalent admittadly) do seem a trifle accelerated for the purposes of dramatic license, but that is a small quibble. The design is stunningly beautiful, Leslie Banks acts Oliver off the screen quite effortlessly and the supporting cast is full of fine cameos, even that veteran mugger Hay Petrie playing quietly and sincerely for once. For its US release, the film was retitled "Twenty-One Days Together" and cut by some ten minutes; our print tonight is of the original British version, and is uncut.

--------------- Intermission ------------

"THE NIGHT HAS EYES" (Associated British-Pathe, 1942) Written and directed by Leslie Arliss; produced by John Argyle; based on the novel by Alan Kennington; Camera: Gunther Krampf; Music: Charles Williams; Art Dir: Duncan Sutherland; US release title: "Terror House"; 8 reels

With James Mason, Wilfrid Lawson, Kary Clare, Joyce Howard, Tucker McGuire, John Fernald, Dorothy Black, Amy Daley.

Although Pathe was one of the most conservative of British production companies, they very occasionally let themselves go with an all-out thriller. Lugosi's "Dark Eyes of London" was one. "The Night Has Eyes", a kind of mating of "The Old Dark House" and "Jane Eyre" was another. Its success as a thriller proved a unexpected embarrassment to them. With good reviews and a prestige name in Mason (on the threshold of being a really top star) it was booked into the huge Odeon circuit as a co-feature with a Paramount dog, "Masquerade in Mexico". (*)

Suddenly the British censors (who were illogically strict on horror films during the war years) had second thoughts, and reclassified the film "H" - a horror film in which under sixteen was forbidden. This meant wholesale cancellations by the circuit houses (then reluctant to show films which couldn't pull on the family trade), hurried replacements (and interesting reissues!) all over town, and an unexpected bonanza for independent houses. The newspaper ads in the London area during those weeks were really confused! Although its horror content is limited to key sequences, it's still a powerful and quite grisly chiller, fairly obvious in its plotting perhaps, but no less effective for all of that. The dialogue is crisp and well-written (except for one moment when the heroine turns on the villain by saying "You're not doing it for me, my dear!"") and the film also boasts two of those standbys of wartime British films - the piano concertine music and the disillusioned Mr. Rochester-derived hero. (Since any patriotic Englishman would naturally be in the forces, there was quite a spare of heroes if either going blind, or were bitter and disillusioned through service in prior wars!)

The sets - lonely house, moors, quicksand - are effective in the stylish if studio-bound manner of Rathbone's "Hound of the Baskervilles" and the film's only drawback (though a minor one, and less jarring than in "Dark Eyes of London") is the use of "American" comedy relief. Generally, the film holds up surprisingly well, not least in the delightfully and openly dirty-minded villainy of Wilfrid Lawson.

(*) Since "Masquerade in Mexico" was a 1945 release, I am in error in citing this film as the co-feature, but it was a film of similar calibre, needing the above-average co-feature strength of a film like "The Night Has Eyes".

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-- Wm. K. Everston --