Tuesday next, February 13th:

"THE FAST LADY" - a new British film which, like "The Comedy Man", and equally inexplicably, is being given no US release other than TV. With its color, star names, slapstick and sex, it would seem to be a sure-fire commercial item, so its non-release is a mystery. A delightful "old-ear" comedy, clearly patterned on "Genevieve", not as good but still most pleasing; with Julie Christie and James Robertson Justice; plus (also not in release in the US), a most enjoyable BBC-TV excursion into filmic nostalgia - "The Picture Palace" - wherein British poet and critic John Betjeman tours some of Britain's great equivalents of the Roxy and the Music Hall, comments on the times that produced them, and shows representative film excerpts from the periods involved. A really unique and charming featurette.

January 6 1968

The British "B" Movie

This is the second of our occasional looks at the "B" picture of a given company or period; last time it was Monogram and Mascot, and in the not-too-distant future it will be Republic. Defining a British "B" is not so easy however, as there were never any British equivalents of Monogram or PRC, specialising in just 2nd features. Furthermore, "B" films in England were often made for reasons other than just programmer entertainment.

First of all of course, both British exhibitors and producers have had legal quotas through the years; an exhibitor must show a minimum percentage of British films, and big American companies like MGM and Warners had to produce enough films of their own over there so that a certain percentage of their yearly output was British. This latter requirement produced some real stinkers, especially in those early days of the talkies when there was no shortage of good British product. In the 30's, the big prestige British films may have been few and far between - but there was a sure output of competent and popular medium-budgeters - the vehicles with Greer Garson, George Formby, Tom Walls, Jack Hulbert et al. So with no real need for more British pictures, the major companies made little effort to make good ones. Just making them fulfilled the letter of the law, and there was no legal need to show them. Thus MGM made cheap serial-like stinkers like "Dr. Syn Fang" which received almost no distribution at all - exhibition being largely limited to Saturday morning showings at the distributor's own London theatre. They were thrown on, no advertising, at 10.30 in the morning, often playing to empty houses until the regular show started at noon, and in so doing they contributed a little to the theatre's admission quota. The effect was rather like going to the Radio City Music Hall and seeing a Lash La Rue western before "The Sound of Music"!

During the 40's, the pendulum swung the other way. British films suddenly became big boxoffice, but the big prestige films and star vehicles were all made by the combines that produced, distributed and exhibited. By the time films like "Odd Man Out" were available to the independent exhibitors, they had exhausted their key boxoffice potential - and by then there just weren't enough independent British films to go around. So a new form of horror came into being - the 35 minute film (anything over 3 reels counted, legally, as a full feature) which was made incredibly cheaply in the sure knowledge that it would be booked just on its British quota label. The short dramatic features obviously couldn't call on dramatic or directorial talent of note, and couldn't earn enough to warrant decent budgets; while the documentaries on barrel-making and herring-fishing, all flat, dully photographed and boringly narrated, exhausted audience patience after the first reel. Of the literally hundreds of these 3-reelers that were made, only one or two had any merit at all.

The deliberate "B"s made by Rank and his subsidiaries were usually cheap and uninspired, far below the level of competence of Monogram and Republic. Because they could be booked in tandem with the same companies' bigger pictures, they were just so much fodder, and the most that can be said for them is that they served as training grounds for a few - a very few - directors and stars of talent.

For the rest, the British "B" had no clearly defined format. The regional studios in the North turned out fast but abysmal comedies with local music-hall comedians. They often ran for two hours or more and were huge successes in their own areas, but were relegated to supporting fare when and if they played London. Most of the smaller companies like Butchers made their films on a medium budget but to first-feature length - hoping to catch a "B" booking on the big circuits, and occasional top-of-the-bill bookings elsewhere. Thus there was never any clearly defined length for a British B - nor were stars always a criterion, since British salaries have never matched those of Hollywood, and apart from the contract stars, an important player would often star in a major film one week, and take a supporting part in an independent film the next.
Some of the best British "B"s, and tonight's program is illustrative of this aspect, came from the fly-by-night companies who tried to get their foot in the door by creating a good impression with their first pictures. They had the curious philosophy of spending far more on their pictures than they should have to make them look good in terms of locations, photography etc. But they still remained "B"s. Had they spent just a little more, for a slightly better script or a couple of bigger names, they'd have come up with quite serviceable "A" pictures. But this was a gamble that nobody seemed prepared to take, and so one is never quite sure whether these really offset and unusual little pictures are "B"s that pay off because of that "extra effort" or "A"s that just didn't have what it takes. In any case, most of these interesting companies died after just a handful of films.

We had planned to run a number of excerpts tonight, but in view of the whole mixed-up field of British "B"s, we finally decided against it. Both of tonight's films are from the same short-lived company, and thus do illustrate quite compactly the aspects we have described above. The musical excerpts we had planned to run (Lupino Lane and Stanley Lupino) would seem to fit better into a complete show on British musicals, due on March 12th, and the other films we'll hold and play in their entirety at some appropriate point.

**THE SILENT PASSENGER** (Phoenix Films, 1935) Directed by Reginald Denham Screenplay by Basil Mason from an original story by Dorothy L. Sayers; produced by Hugh Perceval; edited by Thorold Dickinson; Camera: Jan Stallich; Art Director: R. Holmes Paul, 6 reels.

With John Loder, Peter Haddon, Donald Wolfik, Mary Newland, Austin Trevor, Aubrey Mather, Leslie Ferrins, Ralph Truman, Gordon Mclleod, George de Warfaz, Vincent Holman, Ann Codrington, Dorice Fordred, Annie Esmond.

The gentleman criminologist Lord Peter Wimsey hasn't seen much service on the screen, and he isn't altogether ideally served here by the semi-silly-as-personality of Peter Haddon. Although far from the masculine ideal that Dorothy Sayers created, Robert Montgomery later made a much more satisfactory Wimsey. Haddon at this time was trying to make the grade in a number of quite elaborate comedy-thrillers, but he didn't catch on. He changed his name to Archibald Batty and soon vanished in supporting comedy and character roles. However, he does not monopolize "The Silent Passenger", which has a really tight little script, somewhat Hitchcockian without Hitch's humor, contains quite a few surprises, doesn't telegraph its story twists, and winds up with an excellent and really suspenseful chase sequence in some railroad sidings. There's one unforgettable shock image in this episode, and much of the credit for its effectiveness can presumably be directed to editor Dickinson. Incidentally, with steam engines now having vanished from the British scene, there is a sudden great resurgence of interest in movies like this one over there -- and John Huntley of the EPI tells me that films like this one and "The Flying Scots" draw capacity crowds at the National Film Theatres throughout England, quite a contrast to its box office performance for the British market. The film was not thus being played 2nd-Run to the Huff Society! Donald Wolfik, standard villain in so many British "B"s of the 30's, is joined by that other English heavy and smoothie Leslie Ferrins -- who alas has little to do, since he plays the corpse of the title.

**BRIEF ECSTASY** (Phoenix Films, 1937) Directed by Edmond Greville

Produced by Hugh Perceval; Screenplay by Basil Mason; Camera: Ronald Neame Art Director: R. Holmes Paul; Music: George Walter; 7 reels.

With Paul Lukas, Linden Travers, Hugh Williams, Marie Ney, Renée Gadd, Fred Withers, Howard Douglas, Pauline Lordwell, Peter Cawthorne, Norman Pierce.

In view of its title, it's odd indeed that this film emerges as a kind of composite of "Extase" (which it must have been partially trying to cash in on) and "Brief Encounter" (which of course it predates by many years). Criticism at the time thought it quite daring and outspoken in its sex content -- which by today's standards is almost non-existent. If nothing else, it shows us how far we've come since then. Nothing much new about the film, despite its Gothic housekeeper from the Bronte period, yet it holds interest, has real style, and shows the European background of director Greville (who alternated between France, Holland and Britain in the 30's and 40's). What really gives it class though is the stunning photography of Ronald Neame. Some of the set-ups and compositions are most unusual, the exteriors are quite lovely, and Linden Travers for the first and perhaps the only time, looks quite breathtakingly beautiful. (Neame, like Cardiff and others, later abandoned camerawork for producing and directing). A minor work certainly, but a most unusual and interesting one.