November 12, 1968

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Ealing Studios Program #2: Two wartime comedies

"THE GOOSE STEPS OUT" (Ealing-United Artists, 1942) Directed by Basil Dearden & Will Hay; produced by Michael Balcon; screenplay by Angus MacPhail and John Dighton from a story by Bernard Miles and Reg Groves; Camera, Ernest Palmer; Special Effects, Roy Kellino. 7 reels.

With Will Hay, Frank Pettingell, Charles Hawtrey, Anna Firth, Julian Mitchell, Barry Morse, Peter Ustinov, John Williams, Peter Craft, Leslie Harcourt, Raymond Lovell, Jeremy Haw, Aubrey Mallei, Lawrence O'Madden.

Just as in Hollywood, Abbott & Costello, Laurel & Hardy and Bob Hope were pitted against the Nazis in many of their wartime comedies, so in England were Will Hay, George Formby, Arthur Askey, the Crazy Gang and other comics diverted into highly successful propagandist comedies. "The Goose Steps Out" was one of Hay's last films, and admittedly one of his lesser ones, though still many notches above his very last film, "My Learned Friend," made when he was already a very ill man. Hay had never been a totally successful screen comic prior to his teaming in the mid-30's with Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt; and when he left Gainsborough (and that teaming) to return to solo starring vehicles for Ealing, he lost a lot of his vitality and was never again as successful as he had once been. (See our notes on "Oh Mr. Porter" for more detailed Hay background material.) In his last Ealing comedies, the C.O. Fieldman qualities of his characterization were brought more to the fore, and his Keatonish involvement with antique trains, fire engines and ocean liners was dropped, so that sight gags were lessened, his patter-comedy increased. Although there is good slapstick material in "The Goose Steps Out," the stress is on dialogue comedy (some of it black and quite funny) and those lengthy double-talk exchanges which had their roots in his old musty ball routines. Like so many wartime comedies that seemed hilarious at the time because of topical "in" jokes and the psychological delight in laughing at one's enemies, it falls a little flat in spots - but much of it is still very funny, certainly elaborately presented, slickly paced, and crammed into a relatively brief running time. Another one of its contemporary pleasures is its parade of youthful stars now far better known in their maturity - Barry Morse and Peter Ustinov as Hitler youth for example. Charles Hawtrey - still doing the same act a quarter of a century later in the Carry On comedies - and dignified John Williams, long before "Dial M For Murder" brought him real attention and better roles.

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"LET GEORGE DO IT" (Ealing, 1940) Directed by Marcel Varnel; Associate Producer, Basil Dearden; Camera, Ronald Neame; Screenplay by Angus MacPhail, Basil Dearden, John Dighton & Austin Melford; 8 reels; US title: "Murder in Bergen"


George Formby, with his Harry Langdon personality, Harold Lloyd formula of comedy plus thrills, and an innuomously offensive way of delivering the most outrageous double entendres in his songs, was tremendously popular in the thirties. However, his earlier films for Ealing ("It's in the Air," shown by this society some years ago, marked the turning point) were often quite crudely made for all their action and fast slapstick, and their lack of production values, plus Formby's broad Lancashire accent, made him a definite third to Will Hay and Jack Hulbert, working out of Gainsborough. However, with the lessening activities of Hulbert and Hay, and the success of the Hollywood comedies of the 40's even then when he left Ealing and signed with Columbia, the quality of his pictures dropped. "Let George Do It" is one of his most elaborate and polished productions, with better sets, camerawork and supporting cast than he had had hitherto, and for that matter was superior - in those specific directions - to his subsequent films too. It's a breezy film, quite suspenseful as well as amusing, and with some of the meatiest slapstick since the heyday of Larry Semon! The supporting cast again has some very familiar faces, but not Bernard Lee, the #1 of the James Bond films, here in much less dignified material and a beard to make Formby look a little more like Formby.

Wm. K. Everson

The new Bullettins will be mailed out the coming weekend, and copies will be available next Tuesday. We had hoped to have them ready by tonight, but because of four days' worth of fast production delays (all of which are really special items), but with one real bonus - the long awaited unexpected surprises in the next 3 months - SCon's SURRENDER, Sune Clair's PHANTOM OF THE MOULIN ROUGE, and Walsh's THE BONEY, Dicterle's WHITE ANGEL, Benoir's LA BETE HUMAINE, Roy Del Ruth's THANKS A MILLION, a filmed interview with John Ford, etc.