Tuesday next, January 28th: Raoul Walsh's "THE BOWERY" (1933) with Wallace Beery, Pat Wray, George Raft, Jackie Cooper; and excerpts from "REUNION IN VIENNA" (1933) with Robert Donat and Diana Wynyard.

January 21 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"UNDERGROUND" (British International Films, 1928; rcl: 1929) Directed by Anthony Asquith; scenario: Asquith; Camera: S. Rodwell; 8 reels

With: Brian Aherne, Elissa Landi, Cyril McLaglen, Nora Baring.

Although in our last quarterly bulletin we referred to tonight’s showing of "UNDERGROUND" as "quite possibly the first US showing", we fortunately weren't dogmatic on that point. Subsequent checking reveals that it was released in the US in the Spring of 1929 by the Amer-Anglo Corporation. However, it was never copyrighted here, and since it was hardly a "commercial" film to begin with, and even less so in that changeover period when even the best silents had tough sledding, it was all but "lost" from the beginning, and very little about it has ever found its way into the reference books. Rotha gives it a nod in passing, but at the time that he wrote "The Film Till Now", he seemed unimpressed with Asquith’s work, and dismissed the film as being not "a dim espousal of the spirit of an insinuate organisation". While that criticism may be valid, who ever said that the film had to be that? And for that matter, how many films centred around such "insinuate organisations" as hotels, railway terminals, airports, telephone systems etc., ever really succeeded as "direct expositions?"

Asquith himself, in a "Sight and Sound" interview some years back, considered the film (his first) useful to him, and fun to make but of "no great importance, and implied that with more money and a better script it could have been much better, although it really didn't have the potential to deserve such advantages. Yet in many ways, it is his best film - viewed purely as a film - just as Murnau's "Applause" remains that director's best dramatic film. Asquith studied film in Hollywood in the 20's (of wealthy and titled parentage, he could afford to take a relaxed approach to breaking into the movies, instead of working up from an environment-observed boy) and also absorbed all the Germanic technique that he could. He went to work officially in his own right - and is erroneously given the sole credit for that brilliant British silent, "Shooting Stars", which he had as assistant to A.V. Bramble. On his first solo directorial effort, "UNDERGROUND", he had such good - and thoroughly British - material to work with, that there was almost no opportunity to inject "absorbed" technique. If there is any influence at all, it is probably (though not aggressively so) from Griffith, though at times the editing shows that he had studied the Russians too!! But basically, "UNDERGROUND" is unpretentious and full of solid craftsmanship. "Cottage on Dartmoor" on the other hand, is already pure UFA and impure Lang. And with the coming of sound, the old "fly by wire" film "Tell England" apart, Asquith's career faltered, his visual sense (apparently) no longer needed, and his dramatic sense being insufficiently developed to fill the void. It isn't until the very late 30's - with "Pygmalion" and "French Without Tears" that Asquith really hits his stride again and moves into the major directorial ranks, but with a very different kind of picture. From then until the very end of his career, he was to be associated almost exclusively with "talk" films, and primarily stage derivations. These he did extremely well, with taste and a skilful handling of his actors, but they were satisfying in the way that a good piece of theatre is satisfying. One can enjoy "The Way to the Stars" and "The Browning Version" more than once for their elegance and fine performances, but none of them really exalt as films. "UNDERGROUND" them is a rather frustrating glimpse of a talent that might have been, but somehow got sidetracked. We might well have had another Hitchcock (something we subsequently never did get) and instead we got another Oukor (and after all, John Cromwell and others filled that niche quite well."

"UNDERGROUND" is, if not an inconsistent film, then a curious mixture of two distinct styles. In a rather indefinable way, it has some of the simple beauty of Paul Fejos' "Lonesome"; not its poignancy admittedly, but its flavor of two working people meeting and falling in love in a big city, enjoying simple outings and so forth. Towards the end, the emphasis shifts to melodrama with a Hitchcockian chase (probably it in turn gave Hitchcock a few ideas for the climax of "Blackmail") which admittedly is far too wild to fit in with the gentle theme to which it falls. The rest of the film is as if Asquith decided to use London as a bag of trinkets, toppling one sequence, as he pursues villain over roof-tops, cranes, and inevitably over the third line rail of the subway. It is done with such vigor and realism - there is no back projection or trick work, no obvious doubles - that one hardly feels like complaining. It's a showmanlike ending, just as the stilt ending (mass escape of wild animals) of "Zoo in Budapest" somewhat works against the poetic simplicity of the rest of

** *(True, some of the lighting and composition recalls Fabel. But German style had been so completely adopted by British films of this period that it had become almost a standard native technique. The film is far less consciously Germanic than Hitchcock's "Number 17")*
that film, but provides a solid "popular" climax for those for whom lycra is alone is not enough. Oddly enough, the underground railway itself provides only a small percentage of this climactic chase. Apart from being the most efficient and the cleanest subways in the world (and the first too, beating New York to the punch by many years!) the British subways are incredibly photogenic, and have provided thrill and suspense material for the directors of many British thrillers - "The Man Who Disappeared", "Bulldog Jack" and "The Yellow Balloon" in particular, while of course the subway stalking sequence was one of the highlights of Fritz Lang's "Mammut". Here surprisingly little use is made of the subway's melodramatic potential - but that may have been because in 1928 and 1929, London Transport was streamlining its activities in a great deal, remodelling stations and building new lines, and they may not have wanted to risk public confidence in their operations. Hence facilities may have been granted to Asquith only on condition that he soft-pedal any suggestion of danger or disaster. (The regular railways weren't so particular, as witness "The Wrecker".)

While the film obviously has added nostalgic values to Britians, as in the extensive footage in and around the subways is fascinating in its own right - not least in the sequences on the escalators, where one can read the ads for current London stage and screen shows, "Wings" and "On Approval" among them. A long sequence atop an open double-decker bus as it travels through London, and the New York Night Riders, which is taken from Moore's "Orchids and Ermine". The opening comedy sequence, commenting on the types and nuisances that infest the subways, is topical and undated even today. In fact, little about the London subways seems to have changed since the film was made - other than the fact that Brian Aherne's job - a kind of good-will porter to assist ladies with lost dogs and gloves - doesn't seem to exist today, and in view of the feather-bedding and the strong unions, probably never did. It would be hard indeed to get British unions to dispense with such a cushy and totally unnecessary job! (The big problem today is with inflated ticket prices, who have hiked up so many of the subway porter jobs - and are now demonstrating and crying racial discrimination because they are not allowed to wear their turbans to work. But that's another story, and not for filmic program notes!)

Brian Aherne, not always too flatteringly photographed, and garbed in clothes that don't always quite fit (a realistic touch, or just lack of knowledge?) is good, but his performance - or rather, the handling of him as a performer shows all too clearly why so many promising British actors never got anywhere in British films, and had to migrate to Hollywood. Elissa Landi on the other hand, has a naturalness and charm that she quite lost when she got to Hollywood. It's coincidental that the film gives us a good look at the work of Cyril McLaglen, who played the lead in the British silent version of "The Lost Patrol", referred to at some length in Dick Kraft's notes last week. Incidentally, a presumably authentic and naturalistic touch (but one I never came across in my 20 years in England) shows Aherne sitting by the fire and toasting a kipper - and eating it. The aroma would be delightful - but the mouth of bones less so!

I have left till last, not as a deception but because it really isn't that important, the revelation that this is a French print with French titles. But it really matters not at all. For one thing, the titles are quite simple and elementary. For another most of the dialogue titles are just naturalistic small talk. It is a very simple story, straightforward at all times, and with only four basic characters. It is perfectly clear at all times what is going on, and only towards the end are there minor complications - how the heroine tumbles to the villain's mistresses for example - and even here, the pieces fit into place very quickly. So please don't be dismayed - it's a thoroughly visual work, and even if you make no effort at all to read the titles, you'll find that it flows easily. Quite incidentally, the British Film Institute print has only two-frame flash English titles - even more difficult to read - and its two closing reels are quite badly hypoed. So this French print, going under the title of "Un Cri Dans le Metro", is certainly preferable on all counts.

William K. Everson

GOOD NEWS for veteran Huffines. As you know when we started some 15 years ago, we showed only silents, with occasionally and apologetically, a sound film thrown in. The percentage of talkies grew through the years however, and in recent years we have sometimes been hard-pressed to keep a 50-50 ratio. Now, though alas not permanently, we have returned to those halcyon days when silents outnumber soundies - and our next quarter will see silent programs outweighing sound by quite a comfortable margin! Eric C. Kasten's THE GIRL IN THE FULLMAN with Marie Prevost is the latest addition to the silent backlog.