October 27 1960

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"MOSCOW NIGHTS" ("I Stand Condemned") (Korda-United Artists, 1935) 7 reels
Directed by Anthony Asquith; produced by Alexis Granowsky; screenplay by Eric Sietmann from an original story by Pierre Emoiti; Camera: Phillip Tennura; editors: Willis Hornebeck, Francis D. Lyon; Art Dir., Vincent Korda; With: Laurence Olivier, Harry Baur, Penelope Dudley Ward, Athene Seyler, Morton Selton, Sam Livesey, Walter Hudd, Robert Cochrane, Hay Petrie, Charles Garson, Charles Hallard, Kate Cutler, Moreland Graham, Edmund Willard.

"Moscows Nights" is a curious picture indeed, a "B" picture plot embellished with "Knight Without Armor" trimmings. It is a handsome film in every way, and remarkably (and probably expensively) accurate in terms of period décor, costumes, uniforms etc. Yet not very much happens in it, and its main points of interest for us today are the retrospective ones of looking at something from the early stages of the careers of Asquith and Olivier. Audiences of 1935/6 had no such added incentives to spur their interest, although they may well have pondered WHY the British studios made so many films that were top-heavy in expensive production values and so negligible in their entertainment values. Gaumont-British was the only company seemingly on solid ground in turning out pictures that were good as well as just looking good, and their films - the Hitchcocks, the Jessie Matthews, Will Hay and Jack Hulbert vehicles - stand up remarkably well today. But Korda and so many other production set-ups were too easily impressed by foreign names, and prone to back producers like Teeplis and Granowsky in films like "Moscows Nights" and "The Drain" that cost a small fortune and contained little public appeal. "Moscows Nights" is one of the happier examples in that it does now have a life, and is shorter and snappier than most. Olivier is a rather unsympathetic and priggish hero, but Harry Baur, expertly dubbed, is quite impressive. Asquith, having started out in a predominantly Germanic style, here pays homage to the Russians via some snazzy picture-and-sound rapid-cut transitions.

"Q PLANES" ("Clouds Over Europe") (Columbia, 1939) Directed by Tim Whelan
Produced by Irving Asher; Screenplay: Ian Dalrymple, Brock Williams, Jack Whittingham, Arthur Wimpolig; Camera: Harry Stradling; Art Director, Vincent Korda; Music: Maurice Millen; 3 reels
With Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Valerie Hobson, George Curzon, George Merritt, Gus McNaughton, Sandra Storoe, David Tree, Hay Petrie, Ian Fleming, John Longden, Roy Emerson, David Farrar, John Laurie, Herbert Lomas, Raymond Lovell, Leslie Bradley.

Although basically a thin, ear, serial-like melodrama, "Q Planes" was elevated to a higher status by a jovial, tongue-in-cheek approach (which rendered the wilder flights of fancy easier to take and most especially by the delightfully convincing portrayal of Ralph Richardson. Such upset did Richardson make in his role that there was an immediate outcry from the critics (in this country as well) suggesting that he repeat the character in a series of light-hearted thrillers. Whether such an offer was made to Richardson isn't known, but if it was, he undoubtedly have turned it down. Olivier is rather pleasing in a straight hero role - one of the few times he played such a part without his condescension showing - but he is quite overshadowed by the wit and aplomb of Richardson and the cool elegance of Valerie Hobson. The film was a big popular success in England, not least because of a series of plane disasters at just that time made it highly topical, though also because its modern swashbuckling approach to the then very real threat of enemy aggression made it rather comforting propaganda. In this country, it received outstanding reviews, and one of them oddly remarked that at last (?) it revealed that the British did have a sense of humor after all! Equally oddly, although it was known to be only a year old when it was released here, a few reviewers referred to it as an "old film dog up to date." Olivier's sudden popularity and the cast contained many of his old favorites; including Ian Fleming, the aristocrat Dr. Watson, and two of Britain's portrayers of Sexton Blake - George Curzon and David Farrar, here both working against the Empire.

The front of Denham Studios serves as an airport exterior at one point, but most of the aerodrome scenes seem to have been shot at the old Delaware airport at Weybridge. As an unimportant and purely personal footnote, I might add that I spent many a Saturday on that field as a child, and it would be a real treat to take me there, even in addition to the planes, the airfield was circled by the old Brooklands racing track. I remember thinking it all rather an imposition, and hiding myself away in some ancient plane to read my movie magazines in peace, had I known how soon those wonderful old planes - to say nothing of the roaring racing cars - would soon disappear, to exist only in old movies, I might have paid a little more attention!

--- Wm. K. Everson ---