Monday next, February 16th: Powell and Pressburger's "Booth PARALLELS" (1941) with Leslie Howard, Laurence Olivier, Eric Portman, Anton Walbrook, Raymond Massey; supported by British Ministry of Information wartime propaganda shorts, soft-coating the hard-shell with comedy; Robert Morley, Sydney Howard.

February 9 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two light-weight British films

"UNDER YOUR HAT" (British Lion, 1940) Directed by Maurice Elvey
Produced by Jack Hulbert; based on the musical play by Jack Hulbert, Archie Menzies, Arthur Macrae and Geoffrey Kerr; Screenplay by Rodney Ackland, Anthony Kimmins, L. Green and Arthur Macrae; Music and lyrics by Vivian Ellis; additional lyrics, Claude Hulbert; musical score composed and directed by Lew Stone; Camera: Kurt Greenbaum; 8 reels
With Jack Hulbert, Cicely Courtneidge, Leonora Corbett, Austin Trevor, Cecil Parker, Glynnis Johns, Tony Hayez, Charles Oliver, H.F. Maltby, Mary Barton, Paul Sheridan, Myriette Morven, Roddy Hughes, John Robinson, and Terry Thomas and Michael Medwin as extras.

When "Under Your Hat" opened in Britain in 1940 it was somewhat of a disappointment to Hulbert fans; despite an espionage sub-plot which would have justified it, it had none of the comedy action-melodrama which had been so much a part of the tremendously popular earlier Hulbert films. Hulbert's films had been slowly wearing from a Harold Lloyd forecast to a greater emphasis on musical comedy, and George Formby and Will Hay had overtaken him as the most popular British comics. Moreover, the vague spy theme seemed singularly dated by now, with the country very much at war. In America, the film opened at the Little Carnegie Theatre to reasonably good but hardly enthusiastic reviews, most critics seeming to feel that it started out well, but showed signs of budget curtailment towards the end - and that its plot content hardly matched the expertise of its camerawork and physical mountings.

Actually, it's rather amazing that it was even accepted over here, since it is about the most British of all the Hulbert vehicles. Just as "The King of Jazz" is an expert and accurate filling of a typical Broadway revue, so is "Under Your Hat" nothing more than a transposed London stage musical comedy - which of course is exactly what it was, and a very successful one. Despite the spy theme, the villainy never gets out of the comic opera category, and never even remotely approaches the "seriousness" of such Bob Hope spy spoofs as "They Got Me Covered". It is purely and simply a musical comedy all the way, with song and dance introduced quite without justification, and apart from a wild plane ride in the climax (and other times) they might have done better to sidestep it entirely, it is all staged and acted on a level of genial artificiality so typical of the London musical theatre. One wonders in fact what such solid craftsmen as Rodney Ackland and Anthony Kimmins could have had to do with the screenplay.

Accepted on its own level, it is brisk, breezy and thoroughly entertaining. Some of the gags sound as though they were written by our own Ed Connor: sample - Spy: "Are You Sure?" Miss Courtneidge: "I didn't realize I looked so haggard"! Others however, are far subtler, and I particularly liked the off-screen crash causing Austin Trevor to wonder what Jack Hulbert is doing in his greenhouse, and Leonora Corbett's reply: 'He's resting on your laurels'! Some of the throw-away lines are so thrown away and so local in connotation that it's unlikely that they'll be understood by non-Britons, who of course aren't entitled to understand them anyway. But some of the best humor is a matter of dialogue patter plus situation comedy, as in the marvellous episode near the end when Hulbert and Cicely sit a school("School for girls ... Renunciation for Boys") posing as a pukkah couple from India. Hulbert's absurd old Indian proverbs, and Miss Courtneidge's recounting of passion while on the run from native tribemen, are a delight and in this sequence one sees them at their best as a team. Miss Courtneidge is a constant surprise, since it has been so long since her vintage films have been available, and one tends to remember her only as a foil for Hulbert (to whom she was and is married) in many of his movies, and more recently as a character actress, most especially as the rather touching of Harold Lloyd in "The Lucky Queen". But of course she was a tremendous personality on her own - dancer, singer, all-around eccentric, and possessed of an expert sense of timing. With her various masquerades, dialects, songs and dances, she quite wraps up most of "Under Your Hat".

"Under Your Hat" was Hulbert's last starring vehicle, and his last film of any kind for some ten years; his wife too, was off-screen for a like period. Both are still quite active on the London stage however, and though now in their seventies are as agile and sly as ever; just a couple of years ago I saw them stealing "Dean Ormie" away from Richard Todd and a singularly distinguished ...
It's now 12 years since the Huff last showed this charming and little-known film, so a repeat is well overdue. The print, now as then, has rather more splices than we would like - but it is fully complete, and no other print has turned up in the intervening decade, so we must consider ourselves lucky that we have it at all.

Although Herbert Brenon started out with historical spectacles in 1911 and moved on to the Annette Kellerman extravaganzas and such diversified subjects as Chaplin's "Laugh Clown Laugh", " Beau Geste", "Negril " "The Spanish Legion" and Clara Bow's "Dancing Mothers", he seemed most at home with sensitive and quiet adaptations from plays and books of an unspectacular nature and usually British or Irish origin. The two Barrie adaptations, "Peter Pan" and "A Kiss for Cinderella" are outstanding examples; Warwick Deeping's "Sorrow and Son" another. With the exception of "The Case of Sergeant Orsina" Brenon never quite seemed to hit his stride again in the early 30's. Then, in 1935, he left for England to make a group of films for B.L.P. and Associated British; films that he was to direct and in some cases write. With the exception of the last of them, 1940's "competing but routine Edgar Wallace thriller "The Flying Squad" they were all admirably suited to his talents. "The Dominant Sex" and "Yellow Sands" were both good ones that would repay re-seeing, and perhaps best of all was "The Housemaster".

Author Hay's forte was primarily light farce ("The Middle Watch") and his more serious essays have never been too serious. There has always been a great deal of humanity and, if you like, froth - even whimsy - in Hay's writings. Having tackled Barrie so successfully, Brenon adapted Hay to the screen more adroitly than had ever been done before - or since. Not that "The Housemaster" is a great film; I doubt if any great, or even important, work could be made from any Hay story. But it is a warm and human story and one with a great deal of truth in it. The faults of the film are also those of Hay; one longs for the potential dramatic strength to crystallize into some really powerful scenes. And once in a while that power does come through. But too often it is dispelled by subsequent flippantness, and it takes rather too long for the dramatic conflicts to get under way. But Brenon was ever a faithful respecter of the values of an original work, and if that was the way Hay wrote it, that was the way he would film it. Many episodes are genuinely moving, particularly Kruger's farewell to his boys - a quite beautifully underplayed, simply directed and sincerely written scene. The classroom episodes are quite fine too, and much of the acting - particularly that of Kruger, and Kynaston Reeves as the headmaster - outstanding. Phillips Holmes has surprisingly little to do, but plays his big scene (the discovery of his own authority in the classroom) extremely well.

Only in minor details: the obviousness of some sets, the back projection; does the film really date. And today it makes a rather interesting comparison with the more recent "It".

- Wm. K. Everson

Note: in order to take advantage of the big room, Murman's "City Girl" announced for February 23rd, will be put back to the following week (Monday March 2). Replacing it on February 23rd will be a double-bill of two Allan Dwan spoofs - "The Three Musketeers" (The Bilt Brothers) and "Trail of the Vigilantes" (Frankotch Tone). The new schedule will of course be mailed next week, and this change noted therein.