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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Reed and Hitchcock, 1937

"PENNY PARADISE" (Associated Talking Pictures (Ealing) 1937) Directed by Carol Reed; produced by Basil Deen; scenario by Thomas Thompsett, W.L. Meade and Thomas Browne from an idea by Basil Deen; Camera, Ronald Neame and Gordon Dines; Assistant director, Basil Dearden; music and lyrics by Harry Parr-Davies and Maurice O'Donovan; 7 reels.


"Penny Paradise" was Reed's 7th, and his last "little" picture. It immediately followed his first really big hit "Bank Holiday" (which he made for Gaumont, and which we hope to show soon; it holds up beautifully) and was in turn followed by "Climbing High", "A Girl Must Live", "The Stars Look Down" and "Night Train to Munich". Like so many Ealing films of the period it is more than a film of its own and by no means an "A" - a category of British film which existed in some profusion at that time, and which accounted no little for the economical problems of the British film industry.

Few of the bigger British films of the 30's commented on the depression years to the extent that Hollywood did in films as varied as "Heroes for Sale", "Man's Castle" and "My Man Godfrey". But the smaller films, with their contemporary stories and working-class characters invariably did - as witness Gracie Fields' "Sing us as We Go" shown here a couple of years ago. By 1937, the worst of the British depression was over, but unemployment was still high, and this film reflects a good deal of the fear of unemployment and the "something for nothing" daydreams that are always rampant in such periods. Its plot hinges around the British system of football pools, a kind of legal minimum-cost lottery. The otherwise absurdly over-enthusiastic British obsession with football may well be at least partially explained by this built-in get-rich-quick adjunct. However, it tended - and to a lesser degree still does - to make the British football season unmentionable for the non-football fan. Undoubtedly, one might pick up a sports edition of the daily newspaper and find 90% of the limited space devoted to coverage of current games, the newsreels always had a long football section, and on the radio, important news events always had to wait for detailed reportage on the current scores - and in the days when the Government-owned BBC was the only broadcast news media, one just had no choice. (Detailed weather information for the far-flung fishing fleets also ate up a lot of radio time too!)

"Penny Paradise" has a lot of Frank Capra in it, particularly in the parade of "ordinary" people who become rather nasty when tainted by sudden money, but its closest American parallel is Preston Sturges' "Christmas in July". It's a pleasant, nicely written little film, which is often surprisingly moving - and amusing - considering the trivial nature of the script. It suffers a little from the excess of back-projected Liverpool river-scenes, and the dialects are sometimes a little hard to pick up. But it's an honest and realistic little picture, even its happy ending fairly logical and certainly satisfying. Although this isn't a major point, the film is surprisingly "right" in the details of its interior sets - living rooms, fish mongers and so on. The rather charming little round radio, looking rather like a piece of equipment from a Flash Gordon serial, is typical. There were relatively few new models in radios in those days, and this one specifically designed to look smart and streamlined, and yet to sell at low-cost. Only the really affluent bought radio-grama phones in those days, and the average family bought one of these sets. (They were hardy little pieces of apparatus too - ours lasted well into the post-war years!)

Betty Driver, the film's heroine, was a kind of second-string Gracie Fields who divided her time between radio, vaudeville and films, without having a really big career in any of them. When one first sees her, one reacts almost as one would to the stock comedienne of Mary Wickes or Joan Davis; it seems impossible that this can be our heroine. Yet she has a warmth and pleasant singing style that wins one over rather quickly. Jimmy O'Dea likewise had a mild career as a screen comic and a bigger one on vaudeville. As far as his films go, he is probably best served here, in a supplementary role requiring little actual comic creativity, but some underplayed pathos in lieu of it.

"YOUNG AND INNOCENT" (Gaumont-British, 1937) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock

Produced by Edward Black; scenario by Alma Reville and Charles Bennett from Josephine Tey's novel "A Shilling for Candles"; Camera, Bernard Knowles; Art Direction, Alfred Junge; Music, Louis Levy; editor, Charles Frend; 7 reels.

The 5th of Hitchcock's 5 thrillers for Gainsborough, "Young and Innocent" was one of the quietest and least melodramatic. Rather like Ford relaxing after "The Quiet Man" to make "The Sun Shines Bright", this seems to be Hitchcock doing just what he wants to do - throwing in sequences that he's always been anxious to do but has never had a spot for, and getting out into rural England to enjoy the sunshine and have fun with comic policemen. It was one of the last films from his British period; only "The Lady Vanishes" and "Jamaica Inn" followed before he left for Hollywood.

While it was never one of his best British films, "Young and Innocent" is the one that suffers the most from American editing. Others, like "The 39 Steps", were just snapped at. Here however, not only was the subtle and appropriate title changed, presumably on the theory that it sounded old-fashioned and corny, to a more routine and quite meaningless title, but one whole sequence was chopped out, much to Hitchcock's personal dismay. About half-way through the film the young fugitives call on a relative, partly to establish an alibi, and are caught up in a game of blind-man's-buff at a children's party. It's the most typically Hitchcockian sequence in the film, a sequence that finds parallels in "The 39 Steps", "Saboteur" and others. Although played for comedy, there's an underlying note of real suspense - the couple have to avoid getting caught up in the game so that they can escape before they're found out. Superficially, it seems an easy out to make - it doesn't seem to advance the story in any way, and it must be admitted that the excision is so smooth as to leave no trace at all. But its absence is felt; in such a leisurely film, the elimination of a sequence designed to add suspense at a given point is quite serious. Furthermore, it is the scene that expresses the loneliness of the characters to an extreme, and the audience knows from the beginning who the killer is, and there is never any direct confrontation between him and the hero and heroine. They are never once threatened in any way by him, so the suspense values fall back on the hero finding the important evidence before the police find him - and the important manipulative and delaying tactics provided by that one party sequence are a key part of the film's effectiveness.

Those of you who have never seen the British version may not miss the sequence at all, but because of its absence will undoubtedly rate the film as a lesser Hitchcock. Nevertheless, much of charm and interest remains. The opening sequence, so theatrical that one doesn't really take it too seriously, then pays off doubly with the beautiful shots of the corpse being washed ashore, the swell of the surf raising one arm so that it seems, in some bizarre way, to be swimming in death. The quarry sequence, which has absolutely nothing to do with the rest of the film, provides one of the few melodramatic thrills, and is obviously an episode that Hitchcock had long wanted to do, and just threw in here because the locale seemed to justify it. Hitchcock's fascination with miniatures is also well on display - there's the most intricately designed and photographed railway siding set in one episode. It would surely have been easier and more economical just to go to one of a dozen London suburbs which have identical set-ups, and shoot it live, since there's nothing particularly unique about the design of the set or the way it is used. But not only does Hitchcock use the miniature, but he has the guts to hold the shots long after it has become quite obvious that it is a miniature, albeit an exceptional one. The final sequence of the killer's collapse is dramatically perhaps a little silly - but cinematically fascinating, one of those tremendous tour-de-force single shots which in itself justifies the whole picture. In fact, the film has even less logic than usual for Hitchcock, rather surprisingly in view of the stress on nature's gloomy backgrounds and the playing down of high melodrama. But if Hitchcock plays down excitement, he certainly doesn't tone down his own performance, mugging it up almost like Fernandel in a lovely little comedy cameo as a photographer outside the police station.

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