Monday next, May 4th: Two 1933 Katharine Hepburn vehicles: "LITTLE WOMEN", directed by George Cukor, preceded by "CHRISTOPHER STRONG", dir: Dorothy Arzner.

April 27, 1937
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two by Powell & Pressburger

"I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING" (Rank-OFD, 1945; US release in 1947 by Universal) Written, produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger; Camera: Erwin Hillier; Production Design, Alfred Junge; Music, Allán Gray; 9 rls With Wendy Hillier, Roger Livesey, Finlay Currie, Pamela Brown, Valentine Dyall, Petula Clark, Walter Rudd, George Carney, Duncan Macrae, Hubert Morrison, Nancy Price, Graham Moffatt, John Laurie, Jean Cadell.

After a prolific outpouring of "E" quickies in the 30's, Michael Powell seemed to have found his niche with such interesting late 30's films as "The Spy in Black" and "The Edge of the World" - lean, stylish thrillers and dramas, with a stress on location work. Then, unexpectedly, came his teaming with Emeric Pressburger and the launching of a whole series of big, expensive prestige films - most of them in the post-war period - which were both critical and popular successes (though never in a totally unqualified sense) and did a great deal to enhance British films-making prestige around the world. Most of them do not hold up particularly well today. They are self-indulgent, full of fascinating filmic fireworks and camera trickery, of great interest to the student of film technique, but often quite weak dramatically. Apart from their superb visual flair, their common denominators were themes dealing with misfits of one kind or another, and an air of escapism - not in their entertainment aim, as in their general avoidance of reality and emphasis on fantasy. Even when they tackled a contemporary dramatic theme - as in "The Small Back Room" - they couldn't resist a fantastic surrealist delirium tremens sequence. While today's two films are certainly typical Powell & Pressburger works, they're simpler and less showy than most, and survive as probably their very best film. Powell or certainly to the now rather dated "The Red Shoes", "The Steers to Heaven" and others.

"I Know Where I'm Going", well received in England at the time, but not with any great excitement, is a lovely, lyrical film in which nothing really seems to happen - apart from the exceptionally well-done tidal whirlpool sequence - but which has constant charm, warmth, pictorial beauty and fine performances. Its production is all the more surprising in that it immediately followed a similarly charming and even more uneventful film called "A Canterbury Tale", which was a commercial flop and was never released in this country. (Our own efforts to get a print have thus far been unavailing, since some kind of legal problems have prevented British revival too.) "I Know Where I'm Going" is full of delightful and unpredictable sequences; my own favorite touch is the insane yet typical British logic in placing an area's only public telephone at the foot of a waterfall so that all conversation is immediately drowned out!

"BLACK NARCISSEUS" (Rank-OFD, 1947; US release by Universal) Written, produced and directed by Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger; Camera, Jack Cardiff; From the novel by Rumer Godden; Music, Brian Easdale; Production Design, Alfred Junge; Art Director, Arthur Lawson; 10 reels

With Deborah Kerr, Flora Robson, David Farrar, Jean Simmons, Sabu, Jenny Laird, Judith Parslow, Esmond Knight, May Halli, Eddie Whaley Jr., Shaw Noble, Nancy Roberts, Ley Cn.

A tale about a man and a woman who are fit the Powell & Pressburger bent towards misfits and escapist (or withdrawal), but how much the mood of their film reflects the spirit of the original Godden novel, I don't know. They rarely had a passionate point of view of their own, and this film doesn't really have one either. Although one or two heroines are fairly pointed - the men using such words as "warship" and "byoyon" to teach English to native children - the general anti-church attitude comes through more by implication than statement, and the waters are frequently muddied. But Rumer Godden been at the helm, the results might have been quite different - dramatically stronger perhaps, but almost certainly less pleasing visually. In any case, one need not criticise the film for being un-American, its originality has always been a component of the Powell-Pressburger films. It may - or may not - extend here to the casting of Deborah Kerr and Kathleen Byron as the two most violently opposed nuns. Although both actresses project totally different things, their facial structure is so similar that one can't help wondering whether the intention was to aim at a two-faces-of-the-same-coin effect. If so - again - it is there by inference only.

Notwithstanding the dramatic value of the film - the superb underplaying of the scene wherein Deborah Kerr confesses her weaknesses to David Farrar, and the genuine if bravura horror of the closing sequences - it is of course the pictorial values that matter most. So superbly to the production design of Alfred Junge and the costume work of Jack Cardiff work together that even in black-and-white the film is stunningly beautiful; but of course here, in its original pastel Technicolor, it is quite breath-taking. The sets, nature and
glass shots, and the miniatures, by which the Indian mountain outpost is recreated in Pinewood Studios are quite fantastic in their execution. One knows, if only by the camera movements, that they have to be fake, yet they are thoroughly convincing in a rather cunningly stylised way. Even the few authentic mountain shots, photographed in India to be cut-in as establishing shots, have been muted and given the look of paintings, so that they match perfectly with the studio reconstructions. And the green but never very luscious foliage has somehow been photographed in such a way as to give it the exotic, steamy look indicative of India.

Quite apart from its outstanding qualities as a film, "Black Narcissus" is interesting today as an example of the idiocies of censorship a mere two decades ago. When it was released here, the tyranny of the Catholic Legion of Decency was at its peak, masquerading as "guidance" but in effect forcing the most picaresque kind of censorship on all audiences, Catholic or not, because of the power they held in not only keeping audiences away from specific films, but boycotting thereafter the theatres that played them. Because of this, some films of the period were literally massacred: the American version of Cocteau's "L'Eternel Retour" is a travesty. "Black Narcissus" was hardly butchered, but it was snipped and snipped at, and definitely weakened. The five basic Legion cuts that were made in the film have been restored in this print - and they will be readily apparent since I was unable to obtain color footage of the scenes in question, and had to settle for b/w from a British tv print. As you will see, most of the cuts take place in the middle of dissolves, so the hacking was particularly obvious.

By today's standards the mere thought of removing such scenes is laughable, and the only satisfaction one has to fall back on is that today the Legion - now with a less aggressively non-dedicated to the church as to preclude wishful thinking about the past, let alone an implied love affair. A further cut was of the mad/nymphomaniac nun (quite a combination) deliberately applying lipstuck, in closeup, in the face of the Sister Superior's prayers. And most idiotic of all, the sequence in which the former nun tries to seduce the British overseer, and is repudiated by him. Cutting the scene in the middle achieves the opposite effect, and definitely suggests that (a) the seduction took place, and (b) her subsequent complete madness was a direct consequence of it - which may well have been the editorialsizing effect that the Legion was after.

All in all, "Black Narcissus" is one of the very best Powell & Pressburger films - a real mixed bag of drama, eroticism, whimsy and visual splendor - but an extremely disciplined mixed bag.

William K. Everson

Note: due to the cooperation of the A.F.I. and Mrs Joseph Schildkraut, we have the chance to play a complete original toned print of "HIS PEOPLE" (1925, dir: Edward Sloman). But it will not be available for long, so we have had to displace "CRISIS" from our May 11 program in order to make room for it. "THE CRUISE OF THE JASPER B" stays on the program as announced, and a new date will be set for "CRISIS".

Good things coming up in our next schedule include James Whale's "THE ROAD BACK", "THE INCORRIGIBLE DUKANE" (John Barrymore), "THE GREAT K & A TRAIN ROBBERY" (Tom Mix), "THE COCKEYED WORLD" (Lowe-Loepley), two programs of British comedy with George Formby, Will Hay and Jack Buchanan, "EFFICIENCY EDGAR'S COURTSHIP" (Taylor Holmes, Virginia Valli, Rod la Rocque) "A TALE OF TWO CITIES" (William Farnum version) and a complete European print of "TOP HAT", with all the footage that has been snipped through the years - and there's a good deal more than one might expect.

Postscript: In my notes on "I Know Where I'm Going" I perhaps did not make it clear that "A Canterbury Tale" is also a Powell-Pressburger production; it starred Eric Portman, Sheila Sim and John Sweet, and was one of the loveliest, least-appreciated and quickest-forgotten of all the P & P films.