December 7 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Herbert Wilcox, Anna Neagle - and two British thrones

"NELL GWYN" (British and Dominions Films 1934) Produced and directed by Herbert Wilcox; Screenshot by Miles Malleson; Camera, Freddie Young; Released by United Artists; Music by Edward German and Philip Barham; 7 reels


Obviously - and successfully - planned as a follow-up to Korde's fantastically successful "The Private Life of Henry the 8th", "Nell Gwyn" is quite one of the liveliest of the Wilcox films of the early 30's. If it lacks the great charm of his silent version (we showed a lovely 35mm print of that some years back), the void between the two is explained by the quite apparent fact that Anna Neagle is no Dorothy Gish. Moreover, Miss Neagle - a chorus girl on the threshold of being one of the "great ladies" of the screen - 'tries' much too hard, and never really relaxes with the role. Nevertheless, it's a sprightly and often quite mordant romp; initially it was quite heavily condensed for its US release, although by today's standards of course it seems quite harmless. Historically, it makes an interesting comparison with the current "Cromwell", although we're still missing a film (what a pity Dreyer never made one!) on Cromwell's colourful Davison period, when England was put through an era of puritanism and tyrannical austerity that was directly responsible for the fun-loving larity that was to characterise Charles the 2nd's reign. The film is economically made, but all of its budget shows on the screen; there is a sprightly score that helps it a great deal, the supporting cast including Jeanne de Casalis (better known on British radio, where she specialised in cheeky Willi Burke comedy), oddly enough (because they seem so mis-matched) the wife of Colin Clive.

"SIXTY GLORIOUS YEARS" (RKO Radio, 1938) Produced and directed by Herbert Wilcox; Screenshot: Miles Malleson, Robert Vansittart, Charles de Grandcourt; Camera: Freddie Young; Music: Muir Mathieson; Original Length: 9 reels; this print (see notes below) 10 reels.


The Wilcox-Neagle "Victoria the Great" (1937) was an ambitious but unspectacular film, photographed in black-and-white but with a Technicolor finale. It was such an incredible success that Wilcox made a second but much more elaborate film, "Sixty Glorious Years" the following year. Obviously much of the same ground was covered again, and a few scenes were copied in toto, but the second film was a good deal more ambitious. Photographed entirely in Technicolor, it was also (which the first was not) a kind of panoramic cavalcade of Victoria's reign, covering such highlights as the opening of the Crystal Palace, the Charge of the Light Brigade, Gordon's death at Khartoum - and name-dropping as often as possible to remind us that Dickens, Lincoln, Struass and other immortals were also from this period. British Royalty being a sure-fire draw at British box offices (until quite recently at least), the film exceeded even the success of the first one. It broke several precedents in that it was the first British film to deal with such recent royal personalities, and it was also made with maximum royal cooperation, which extended the use of castles and other important locations. During the war years, an attempt was made to combine the two films into one, under the new title of "Queen Victoria". It was a sad hash, jumping from color to black-and-white and back again, and lacking continuity of supporting characters. No original color prints (or negatives) of "Sixty Glorious Years" seem to have survived, possibly having been sabotaged during the war. Or possibly tonight is a complete black-and-white one to which I have added the opening two reels of "Victoria the Great" (the second film picked up the story later, eliminating Victoria's ascension to the throne) and a rather charming sequence, also from the first film, in which Victoria and Albert are passengers on the maiden trip of a new locomotive.

The film's main asset is the efficient way it organises so many highlights into a cohesive whole without the need of obvious re-arranging or fictionalising; decorum and awe of royalty seem to be the watchwords, rather stifling Wilcox's already limited creativity (it's a couple of reels before he seems able to approach his royal characters for closeups!), yet it's a dignified and sometimes rather touching work, and certainly an elaborately conceived one. Although not a major work, it is quite possibly Wilcox's best film - and what a marvellous monumental double-bill it would make, preceding the Frank Lloyd-Noel Coward "Cavalcade"! Aubrey Smith is Wellington once again, and Miles Malleson, bless his heart, writes himself in marvellous cameo as a dying Crimean soldier!