Monday next, March 26th: Two 1930 operettes: GOLDEN DAWN with Vivienne Segal, Walter Woolf King, Noah Beery, Lupino Lane; preceded by THE LOTTERY BRIDE with Jeanette MacDonald, John Garrick, Zasu Pitts, Joe E. Brown.

Note: the previously unselected film accompanying John Ford's 1920 JUST PALS on April 5 will be THE GOLDEN WEST (1922), an excellent pocket-spiro with George O'Brien, one of the best of his elaborate early sound Fox westerns, none of which have been on television.

March 22 1921
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Lauffer and Gilliat, and the Gainsborough Ladies at War

MILLIONS LIKE US (Gainsborough-G.P.D., 1943) Written and directed by Sidney Gilliat and Frank Lauffer; produced by Edward Black; Camera, Jack Cox and Roy Boulwills; 8 reels


After many years as solo and collaborative screen-writers, most successfully on Hitchcock's "The Lady Vanishes" and Reed's "Night Train to Munich", Lauffer and Gilliat became writers/directors in 1943. Their first effort was a propaganda film for the Ministry of Information, "Partners in Crime" (which we showed a few months ago) and "Millions Like Us" was their first feature. An instant critical success, it was not so quickly picked up by the public, then surfeited both by conventional war films and the increasing presence of authentic documentaries, both short and feature-length, and documentary-derived fiction films. The deliberate underplaying of "Millions Like Us" tended to get it lost in this documentary plethora. Later however, when its stars were better known, it was reissued more successfully. Told with warmth, humor and restraint, it is easily one of the most convincing evocations of that particular phase of the war. Audiences might support "Mrs Miniver" more because it was such grand-scale Hollywood schmaltz - and they certainly appreciated the sincerity of Hollywood's tribute - but they didn't take it seriously for a moment. There was a great deal more truth and real sense of period in "Millions Like Us", rather oddly in fact, since the comedy and the thriller had been seen and would be ("Green for Danger", "State Secret") Lauffer and Gilliat's basic forte. One reason that "Millions Like Us" works so well is that its propaganda is soft-sell, and its simple story manages to avoid most of the expected clichés. Moreover, it was realistically "upbeat" at a time when such an approach was sorely needed, but wouldn't have been believed if overdone. Patricia Roc, in her first major role following a few years in "B" pictures, is often quite touching although - perhaps deliberately - not too flatteringly photographed. One more point; this print is of the later release, which was slightly trimmed by removing the gag guest appearances of Naunton Wayne and Basil Radford, whose comic comments on the war, the Government etc., had by then died sufficiently to only legally justify trimming them out and bringing the film to a more war-feature length.

"TWO THOUSAND WOMEN" (Gainsborough-G.P.D., 1944) Written and Directed by Frank Lauffer, with additional dialogue by Michael Pertwee; Camera, Jack Cox; Produced by Edward Black; music, Hans Ney; 5 reels


Lauffer and Gilliat didn't always work wholly as a team; sometimes one would direct and the other write, or occasionally - as here - one would be entirely on his own. Although most enjoyable, "2000 Women" was less successful, and it suggests that Lauffer without Gilliat really needs to return to Brackett without Wilder. With the exception of Margaret Lockwood, all of the Gainsborough ladies were put into this enjoyable war film, which, like Errol Flynn's "Desperate Journey", made its useful propagandist points but was never meant to be taken too seriously. Some of the British stiff-upper-lippery in face of Nazi bestiality, and especially a few great lines from Flora Robson, betray the unwitting (and of course totally justified) British arrogance which won the war as much as anything else. Patricia Roc, not given the full Hollywood glamour treatment by the same casting directors, comes closest to appealing - and, (age-wise) at the other end of the scale, there's an interesting appearance by Janette Scott, still just a toddler in her mother's arms. (There Here) valiantly singing "There'll Always Be an England". The film had no major US release, but was cut and picked up by a New York independent who retitled it "House of a Thousand Women", a surprising understatement that shortchanged the British by a thousand ladies, but did of course manage to suggest something rather different and of decidedly lesser decorum. --- WM. K. EVANS ---