April 19 1971 TWO BRITISH TECHNO COLOR FILMS The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Soc.

"WINGS OF THE MORNING" (20th Century Fox-British, 1936; rel. 1937)
Directed by Harold Schuster; produced by Robert T. Kane; scenario by Tom Geraghty from stories by Donna Byrne; Director of Photography, Ray Hennahan; cameramen, With Henry Fonda, Annabella, Leslie Banks, John McCormack, J.D. Williams, Philip Sydney Frost, Stewart Rome, Irene Vanbrugh, Harry Tate, Helen Hayes, Edward Underwood, Mark Dugan, Sam Livesey, E.V.H. Ramet, Steve Domoghs, Capt. R.C. Lyle, Evelyn Ankers.

Britain's first 3-color Technicolor film was an enormous commercial success on its own home ground, and a substantial one here where the Technicolor, the Irish market, Fox's high-pressure publicity (including some hard-sell on Annabella as a major new star) and the prestige of Radio City Music Hall all helped to pay the bills. For much was involved in both (commercially, it's a curious mixture of alert showmanship and apathy. Though not yet a major star, the usage of Henry Fonda (a carefully dotted line of dialogue has him as a Canadian!) was fairly astute, since he had just done Hollywood's first outdoor 3-color Technicolor film, "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine". On the other hand, apparently assuming that with Technicolor and a good name a director was a relatively unimportant factor for handed the film (and a follow-up British Annabella film, "Dinner at the Sands") to a former Fox Hollywood director, it was to remain true that the old "big" prestige films; even in Hollywood he remained permanently with B-plus and A-minus roles like "Jack Slade." And the story is abysmally old-fashioned. I haven't read the original(s) by Donna Byrne, but since he also wrote "Hangman's House," I suspect that it (they) had a little more meat on the bones. It's a typical British mid-20's film scenario, exploiting novelistic romance, landscape and that staple of British novels and movies, the gypsy. A disintegrating family link to the British scene, the gypsy with his caravan was the bridge and the film's appeal was to America's cowboy and covered wagon. A clue to the film's innate lack of value is to see the film in black-and-white, there it becomes dull, tiresome and incredibly simple-minded. But in color, it somehow works. It was designed for color - the landscapes of England and Ireland, the green downs, the horse races, the reds of London buses, the shimmering of the Coiney's "dress" clothes, even the color combinations of Annabella's clothes; the night scenes with their glowing lanterns, mild love scenes played against blue pools or golden wheat. The colours are lovely, gentle, graceful, natural enough. Since the mid-20's box office, it was hard to attract a major star with this film, and John McCormack, well past his prime, made a graceful farewell. A very attractive Evelyn Ankers can be seen in two different bit roles. Old-fashioned certainly, but with occasional charm and wit, "Wings of the Morning" - in this original Technicolor form - is still a most enjoyable diversion. Incidentally, existing in the middle of a brief disfavor (where the location changes abruptly from Spain to Ireland) it looks as though there is footage missing. There isn't - though how former director Schuster could direct such a ragged transition is a bit of a mystery.

"LONDON TOWN" (Rank-G.F.D., 1946) Original story, production and direction by Weslay Ruggles; Screenplay by Elliot Paul, Siegfried Hess, Val Guest; Camera, Ernest Miller; songs by Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke; Daffodil ballet by Agnes deKille; Musical Director, Salvador Camarata; Art Director, Ernest Castle; Assistant to Producer: William Collier; 10 reels

With Sid Field, Onoe Cox, Kay Kendall, Claude Rains, Pratula Clark, Sonnie Hale, Marjorie De Somer, Eunice Purfield, Lucas Howling, Marian Saunders, Beryl Davis, Charles Banton, Scotty McHarg.

Riding on the crest of a post-war boom of prestige films that were both artistic and commercial successes, the Bank organization almost wrecked itself in 1946 with two gigantic productions designed to show that they could cut the Hollywood corn. Considering "Casablanca" and "London Town," The former at least had some plausibility factors and was a worthy failure, but "London Town," though quite fascinating today - and certainly magnificent today - and certainly magnificent today - was a total fiasco. It was a clear-cut attempt to combine all the elements of the big, busby Berkeley and Sam Goldwyn musicals into one package and it failed on all counts. For one thing, bringing in American songwriters to give it a Hollywood zip gave its musical elements a hybrid quality. Agnes deKille was brought in for Cecil B. de Mille's - and that any Soho night-club choreographer could have done as well. And the biggest mistake of all, of course, was in importing Wesley Ruggles. From the credits, it is apparent that the British regarded this as a copypaste to the acquisition of Cecil B. de Mille's - and that Wesley Ruggles was by them very much of a has-been and that (b) with the exception of a few minor pictures like "Stage You Sinners", he had never been associated with music in any way! Furthermore, he had always been somewhat of a second-rate director, coasting for a long time on the success of
"Cimarron," it's significant that the films of his that hold up best are those with dynamic and direction-immune stars like Hana Vent and John Barrymore. In the event, he had been politely exiled to London by MGM, and possibly he himself sold a bill of goods to the Rank Organisation.

The decision to make "London Town"—and with him at the helm—was the greatest British blunder since the decision to storm Balaclava Heights. Quite incidentally, it finished Ruggles, who never made another film.

The meagre opening credits, even if a steal from the design-style initiated by R.K. Goldsmith, lead one to expect a typical Hollywood production, but what emerges is neither Hollywood nor London. The decision to star Sid Field was at least a showmanlike one; he was enormously popular on the London musical-revue stage, enjoying that same kind of idolatry than Danny Kaye and Al Jolson attracted in this country. (Field was a great friend of Kaye, and also a performer who had been openly supported and endorsed by the British Royal Family). He had made a couple of nondescript British quickies earlier, but they had made no attempt to exploit his special talents. Unfortunately, like the British radio star Tommy Handley, Field just did not come over on the screen. They certainly tried: he has every kind of material, ranging from comedy to pathos, and a couple of his stage skills transplanted intact. But the magnetism that he had on stage just isn't there—and it was even more absent in his next film. (He died shortly thereafter). The skill with the camerawork is mildly amusing, more on its outrage values than anything else, but the filming sketch is impossibly labored and unfunny, the more so since we are now so familiar with J.C.Fields' similar but much subtler sketch.

The cast is full of talented people who for the most part are given nothing to do—doubtly disappointing since, at the time, people like Sonja Hale and Claude Hubert hadn't been in a decent-sized movie in years. Petula Clark's rather self-conscious charm is still quite pleasing though, and Tessie O'Shea belts out a good number or two. The "Theon and One" girls fall rather below Berkeley and Goldwyn Girl standards, though they were photographed in the same clusters and with the same sweeping camerawork; they are all identified by name in the credits, and I think only one of them ever did anything else—and then of minimal proportions.

The one thing that can't be taken away from the film is its size. It is big—though often to no purpose. I remember that during production the papers were full of publicity stories about the giant grand piano constructed for the big finale. It's there all right, and it's big, with a dozen chorus boys in tails seated before it—but bigness is all it has alas, and once there, nobody knows what to do with it except play it—and one regulation-size piano would have done for that.

Apart from a rather charming musical-scene done up and down the River Thames, the color lacks the pastel quality of British Technicolor, and seems to aim delicately at the astrid and brassy color of, specifically, the Danny Kaye Goldwyn films. Nevertheless, the use of color is bold and interesting, if rarely very pleasing.

British critics to a man were aghast when the film was premiered. In those days of rigid post-war austerity, the main complaint that it was a criminal waste of a budget reputedly over a million pounds. Had the film succeeded, it would have been justified—but nobody felt that it even approached the expertise of such less ambitious Hollywood musicals. Very long, it was trimmed down to the length of tonight's print —approx. 105 minutes—and that apparently helped it quite substantially. Dreams of conquest of the American musical market were soon shattered however. American exhibitors were quite unconscious in their apathy. Finally, in 1953—some eight years after its production—United Artists released it in the U.S., as "By Heart Goes Crazy," trimmed to a 90-minute second feature. I don't recall it even having a New York showing; certainly it wasn't reviewed except by the trade papers. Looking at it today one is rather reminded of the operatic fiasco staged by Rees for his unentailed mistress. It's a colossal film's white elephant, which, like the Coliseum in Rome, may be around quite awhile as an archaeological reminder of the glories of a former empire.