A reminder: the July 5th program (SYNAG, THE IRON DUKE) has been transferred from the 5th (a public holiday, building closed) to Wednesday July 7th. The summer schedule will be mailed prior to that date, confirming the change for those members not otherwise aware of it.

June 21, 1971

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Duvivier & Renoir in Hollywood


Of the "Big Three" French directors who migrated to Hollywood during the war years - Duvivier, Renoir and Clair - Duvivier, who had worked there before ("The Great Waltz") seemed best able to turn out the kind of slick and glossy product that Hollywood wanted - "Lydia", "Tales of Manhattan", "Flash and Fantasy" and "The Impostor". However, in spite of obvious freedoms - liberal budgets, his own scenarios - his films somehow seemed the least personal. Clair's were less successful, but they were recognizably Clair, while Renoir lost his identity least of all - perhaps because he never had a really recognizably directorial style, his films being linked by themes and humanity rather than technique. At the time "The Impostor" seemed rather a common-place film. It invited obvious comparisons with the similar Duvivier-Gabin "Escape from New York", and moreover it was in many respects Errol Flynn's vehicle, "Uncertain Glory". Universal obviously weren't too excited by it, slipping it out as a second feature with the routine Donald O'Connor musical "Chip Off the Old Block". The passage of a quarter of a century hasn't suddenly turned it into a masterpiece, but it is a much better film than it seemed at the time - or perhaps it is just that its genre is now less commonplace. It is an unusually handsome and carefully made production, far more expensively mounted than its predecessor at the time indicated. And its films are primarily those concerned with all the period: a propagandist "escalation" of the alleged in which free Europe held America (viz, the "toast" scene) and an uncoupling utilization of all the B2 contrast players on the film's Frenchmen!

"THIS LAND IS MINES" (Rko Radio, 1943) Directed by Jean Renoir. Co-produced and written by Dudley Nichols; Camera, Frank Redman; Production Design, Eugene Lourie; Music: Lothar Peri; 10 reels With Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Sullivan, Robert Slezak, Kent Smith, Ursula Jeans, Philip Merivale, Thurston Hall, George Coulouris, Nancy Gates, Ivan Simpson, John Donat, Frank Alton, Leo Bulgaok, Weston Chambers, Cecil Weston.

Even more so than "The Impostor", "This Land Is Mines" suffered at the time from coming out amidst a wave of "occupied Europe" movies; Hollywood was changing their tone on both A and B levels - "The Edge of Darkness", "The Moon is Down", "Chetniks" "Underground" - and even Britain's output in this genre was quite prolific. Most of them too had the showmanship advantage of vigorous action, and by contrast, the restraint and humanity of Renoir's film made it seem rather tame. But while, for example, Milestone's films - "The Edge of Darkness", "North Star" - now seem over-wrought and heavy-handed, interesting only for their physical action, Renoir's film holds up rather well, not only as one of the most moving films of its type but also - next to "Swamp Water" - probably the best of Renoir's five Hollywood movies. Its one shortcoming, rather surprisingly, is Charles Laughton. He gives a fine and obviously carefully thought-out performance, but it remains that, a performance, and is not submerged to the theme itself in the way that the performances of Gabin, Fresney and Stroheim were in "La Grande Illusion". However, Laughton has always been a sensitive and difficult man to work with, and presumably the language barrier made it difficult for him and Renoir to really discuss in depth any concept of the role. In view of the film's overall quality though, it is a small quibble. Renoir has never been a demonstrative director - audiences always have to meet him half-way and give a lot of themselves, emotionally and physically, to get the most out of his films - never more so than with "La Grande Illusion" which is a complicated film, but which at the same time requires a certain amount of work from the audience. In a lesser degree, "This Land is Mines" makes the same demand - which may be another reason why it was not an unqualified success with wartime audiences seeking either escapism, or wartime films that spilled all the issues out for them.

William K. Everson