Monday next, Sept. 20th: "STREET ANGEL" (1928, dir: Frank Borzage) with Janet Gaynor, Charles Farrell; silent with music track; preceded by "All Star Fakes", a diverting 1926 magazine reel, and "Rambouled" (1917), a fascinating British 2-reel slavestick comedy, incredibly imitative of Sennett, and starring Fred Rains (father of Claude Rains).

Sept.13 1971

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

An Evening of Victorian Comedy and Melodrama

"VICE VERSA" (Two Cities-Bank-G.F.D., 1947) Written, produced and directed by Peter Ustinov; Associate Producer, George H. Brown; Assistant Director, Michael Anderson; from the novel by F. Anstey; Camera, Jack Hildyard; Music, Antony Hopkins; 9 reels With Roger Livesey, Kay Walsh, Petula Clark, Anthony Newley, James Robertson Justice, David Forsyth, Patricia Baine, Joan Young, Vida Hope, VJ Bailey, Ernest Jay, Kynastan Reeves, Harcourt Williams, James Hayter, Alfie Bass.

Prolific actor, writer and scenarist, Peter Ustinov (with the smaller scale but delightful "School for Secrets" behind him) seemed to be trying to launch himself as Britain's own Orson Welles with this elaborate, self-indulgent and rather self-consciously clever farce. Probably only his extremely youthful appearance prevented his also playing the role of the headmaster, a fortunate circumstance in that the film thereby introduced us to another newcomer in the person of James Robertson Justice. Justice's performance is a masterpiece of comic tyranny, and just as Clifton Webb was almost permanently typed for a similar performance in "Sitting Pretty", so has Justice been confounded to repeat the role ad nauseam - frequently without the benefit of such good writing. "Vice Versa" came to the screen at an awkward transitional period in British comedy; most of the old sight gag comedians were dead or in retirement. George Formby had made his last film the year before. A more naturalistic style of British comedy was developing, and the new Ealing brand of humor was launching itself that very year in "Hue and Cry" ("Vice Versa", something of a Victorian equivalent of Thorne Smith's "Turnabout", aimed rather broadly at the style as well as the content of Victorian humor, and was not generally appreciated. Time somehow has helped it; its pompous snobbery is still a flaw, but it somehow seems an appropriate one, while the genuine humor is often very funny. Moreover the youthful appearances of Anthony Newley and Petula Clark now give it a kind of built-in nostalgia which of course was not present at the time, but is nevertheless rather endearing. In a way, it's Britain's only major attempt to emulate the Clair of "The Italian Straw Hat", and the two films are kin in many ways.


Coming virtually half-way in Lean's career - the 8th of his 15 films between 1942 and "Ryan's Daughter" of 1970 - "Madeleine", because of its rather lukewarm reception at the time, has been allowed to slip into mild oblivion and was not even included in the KMA's recent Lean cycle. It was the last of his films for Rank; a tremendous improvement over its somewhat superficial predecessor, "The Passionate Friends", but an admitted disappointment after the two Lean/Korda films and "Brief Encounter". However, it need not fear unflattering comparison with the increasingly spectacular films that followed for Korda, Columbia and MGM. The lack of excitement it generated in England was in some ways understandable. The Madeleine Smith case had become such a classic of its kind that it was known inside and out; not only was the outcome of the case known, but the solution was a dramatically unsatisfying one. Moreover, Ann Todd was no longer a major boxoffice name. The film was designed as a showcase for her by Lean, then her husband, and the supporting cast was devoid of any major commercial names. The film had tremendous style, superlative photography, and an interesting and not overdone use of sound (the rustle of Madeleine's gowns for example, as an only once repeated motif), much of what he tried here Lean later returned to; although the screen direction is different (Lean was always careful to change direction or composition to camouflage his repeats) the brief, idyllic scenes of Madeleine on the beach are remarkably similar to the like scenes in "Ryan's Daughter". But, even with Opus, there was little admiration for style per se in films of the late 40's unless there was solid plot to go along with it; it's ironic that Lean's later films should be rhapsodized over for their same style even though the dramatic content was not so much bad but in fact his superlative professionalism and craftsmanship was by now the total of Lean's trademark. "Madeleine" is a bit slow and stiff in its story-telling perhaps, but it's full of beauty and a creative use of the camera and the editing-shears that repay close concentration throughout. --- Wm. K. Everson ---