The Theodore Huff memorial Film Society

October 26 1971

Both of tonight's films are from an interesting and prolific period in British films when Alexander Korda's London Films had suddenly come to the fore again as the major source for quality British movies. Many British films from this period received no U.S. release at all, or were released directly to TV; still others were severely cut in the hopes of being absorbed on the double-bill market. Both of tonight's films were out by some 30 minutes apiece, and were extremely difficult to track down.


Frank Launder was always the lesser talent of the Lauder-Gilliat team, and the films over which he had the more dominant control tended to be a little erratic and uncertain. This one is certainly a strange mixture of satire, Cinderella romance and expose, and doesn't come off as a unified whole. Nevertheless, it covers a lot of territory, has at times a simple charm, at others a real poignancy, has some fine performances, and is often very funny indeed - with its satire of the film business understandably coming off best. Even cutting it down to 8 reels (it turned up much later on TV) it was a virtual disaster until the sequence of Alastair Sim's funny yet sad appearance as a film producer in the midst of a British film crisis - a crisis that is still with us (and the British) 20 years later. Although not an official remake, Val Guest's much later "The Beauty Jungle" (US title "Contest Girl") used this film as a springboard and reworked much of it into a more glamorous and more ambitious framework.


Powell and Pressburger's films of the 40's were almost all either escapist entertainment, or were more serious, at least essays on themes of escape and withdrawal from the contemporary world - to the world of the ballet in "Red Shoes" , to a Himalayan monastery in "Black Narcissus" , to the next world in "Staircase to Heaven". "The Small Back Room" was their only truly serious look at the contemporary post-war world, and some of its problems, its only hint of fantasy was in a bizarre surrealism delirium tremens sequence, obviously inspired by "The Lost Weekend". As a piece of film-making it was one of their best, and as a dramatic thriller it was realistic, moving, and of frequently almost unbearable suspense. Though extremely well received by British critics, it had virtually no British exhibition at all. There was no London first-run, and no circuit booking. (London has no area like 42nd Street, so one couldn't even bank on catching it in a catch-all location like that). I recall waiting several months after its press-show for it to turn up at Goldner's Green, a North London suburb, and after that its subsequent showings were quite infrequent.

In this country, in much-edited form, it opened at the 72nd St. Trans Lux, and again virtually disappeared. The cutting consisted of minor trims, which started in the very first scene, and the total elimination of the secondary plot involving Leslie Banks (who thus had only one brief scene at the end, in the U.S. version!) The cutting was carefully done, and since all of the sub-plot was removed, there were no jagged ends left showing. All of the key scenes remained intact and, oddly, there were no censor-dictated cuts, but of course the rhythm and the balance of the film were disturbed, even if the dramatic content was not. It's good to have a fully complete print of this very fine film on hand finally, albeit a somewhat worn and scratched one. Printing these notes at the very last minute, we were dismayed to note that the print itself carries no subsidiary credits (cameraman, special effects etc.) and nor does the entry in the Film Daily Year Book - and in the wee hours of the morning, there is no way of tracking them down. But we'll have them on hand on a later occasion for those of you who like to keep the record straight - and complete.

William K. Everson