March 27, 1972

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE ASTONISHED HEART" (Rank-General Film Distributors, 1956) Directed by Terence Fisher and Anthony Darnborough; produced by Anthony Darnborough for Sidney Box; Original story and screenplay, Noel Coward; Music by Noel Coward; Camera, Jack Asher; 8 reels

With Noel Coward, Celia Johnson, Margaret Leighton, Graham Paye, Joyce Carey, Amy Veness, Ralph Michael, Michael Hordern.

In 1950, the "prestige" productions that Britain had been turning out with some regularity since the early war years were beginning to lose their magic touch. Despite the deliberate exploitation of elaborate production values, and scenarios that seemed daringly uncommercial, too many films were beginning to misfire — and "The Astonished Heart" is typical. Today, with the reissues of The Hamlet and with which it has certain vague parallels, it is perhaps academically more interesting. Certainly with its gloss and its sharp Coward lines and its trio of starring performances, it's a vastly entertaining movie. But it's far removed from the poignancy and honesty of "Brief Encounter". The casting is too pat — Celia Johnson and Margaret Leighton perfectly typecast as intelligent-but-dull wife and glamorous-and-exiting mistress. Even the deliberately understated lines at the moments of greatest crisis stress the theatrical artificiality of it all. All prints now available seem to be a bit trimmed from the original British release, but while I saw it then I recall nothing of any great moment missing from this version; if anything, the tightening of pace has helped and makes it seem a much less turgid movie now. Time hasn't made it a better film, but it has I think made it generally a more entertaining one. It was also Terence Fisher's first real "prestige" film for Rank; despite the success of "So Long At The Fair" which followed his tenure with Rank was a brief one. He soon joined Exclusive-Hammer on "The Mummy", gradually working his way up to become their leading horror specialist.

"THE GOOD COMPANIONS" (Gaumont-British-Fox, 1933) Directed by Victor Saville Screenplay by W.A. Lipscomb from the novel by J.B. Priestley; Camera, Bernard Knowles; 9 reels

With Jessie Matthews, Edmnd Gwenn, John Gielgud, Mary Glynne, Percy Parsems, A.W. Lascelles, Florence Bridge, Frank Pettingell, Lawrence Hare, Anatriss Esmond, Max Miller, George Zucco, Margaret Yardy, Gilbert Davis, Henry Crocker, Dennis Hoey, Viola Compton, D.A. Clarke-Smith, Finlay Currie, Jack Hawkins, Muriel Aoked, Ivor Barnard, Olivo Sloane.

Unseen for years, with a reputation enhanced (as is often the case) by a much inferior remake in 1956, "The Good Companions" not unexpectedly fails — a little — to live up to its reputation. But it's easy to understand its tremendous success in 1933, as one of the first British talkies of real professional quality after an interwar period of grubby, dommingly-made films designed to get their money back at home with few ambitions elsewhere. It does have a real old-fashioned style, impressive photography and lighting, and a great deal of charm. If the studied informality of the acting seems occasionally affected today, it was at the time a big improvement on the rigid theatricality of so many earlier British talkies. J.B. Priestley's story is not markedly original — and it takes a leaf out of Warner's book of cliches for the big musical finale — but it does have a sense of period, and a honest feel for the people of the only moderately-talented musical show must tour the provinces and seaside towns of England. With the exception of an occasional bad bank projection shot, it's a slick production in all aspects but one. The sound recording was always bad on this picture, making a big dent in its potential profits outside England. The Yorkshire accents didn't help either, and this print — taken from a hyping and shrinking 35mm original — has the ravages of age to contend with as well. The sound is quiet in the first ten minutes, a bit muddy thereafter, but fortunately of much better quality in the second half of the film — wherein are concentrated Jessie Matthews' trio of very pleasing musical numbers. As always she is charming, graceful, sensuous — but admittedly doesn't have a great deal of competition from the other younger members of the cast. John Gielgud (like Olivier in the same period) was then a singularly mannered and self-conscious performer. Max Miller (as the publisher's agent) here has just one scene, but commands attention immediately. This was his first film, and he was soon to become one of the most popular British comedians of the 30's, his career checked somewhat by an unfortunate penchant for really bad pictures. He worked at least one occasion at a Royal Command Performance: Several other cast members were directed to good roles the next few years. Jack Hawkins did rather better when he matured, cameraman Knowles became an efficient director, and Finlay Currie — then typified in picture after picture as a high-pressure Hollywood executive or show business stereotype — likewise hit his stride much earlier as a character actor in such films as "The Brothers" and "I Know Where I'm Going".

— Wm. K. Everson —