Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

April 19, 1976

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS (National Provincial Film Distributors, 1936) Directed by Tim Whelan; Screenplay by Garnett Weston, Austin Melford, Tim Whelan, with additional dialogue by John Drinkwater, from the novel by George Eliot; Produced by John Klein; US release (in 1939) by Standard Pictures; 8 reels.

With: Frank Lawton (Philip Wakem); Victoria Hopper (Lucy Deane); Fay Compton (Mrs Tulliver); Geraldine Fitzgerald (Maggie Tulliver); James Mason (Stephen Tulliver); Griffith Jones (Stephen Guest); Mary Clare (Mrs Moss) Athene Seyler (Mrs Pullet); Ben Liebey (Mr. Tuller); Amy Veness (Mrs Deane); Felix Aylmer (Mr. Wakem); Eliot Makeham (Mr. Pullet); William Devlin (Bob Jakim); Ivor Barnard (Mr. Moss); David Horne (Mr. Deane); O.B. Clare (Mr. Gore); Cecil Ramage (Luke)

Surprisingly, this was the first and only time that the British ever filmed one of their more respected literary classics. Its delay in this country for more than three years didn’t help it in terms of reviews, and it was presumably brought over only in an attempt to cash in on the success of "Wuthering Heights". It even opened quite prestidigiously at the Astor. Thereafter it stayed around for a surprisingly long time, as a second-string art-house staple; and was reissued (in Britain too) to cash in on the great success of James Mason in the early 40's. In the mid-40's however it seemed to disappear totally, perhaps shunted off the screen by the far more elaborate British adaptations of Dickens. It has many shortcomings it's true, not least among them the fact that its misguided independent producer went broke before the film was finished, and there's a hurred, pathwork look to some key scenes. On the other hand, it is helped by the Hollywood expertise of director and cameraman, and the final flood scenes, though brief, are quite surprisingly good for an independent British film. The script is a rather strange collaboration between a literary talent, Hollywood personnel associated chiefly with melodrama, and a British scenarist who specialised in George Formby comedy. I must admit I did not have the book, and was quite surprised at the dramatic intensity (and surprises) of its admittedly old-fashioned narrative. Also, its lack of major production values is not necessarily a liability; as with Bentley's "The Old Curiosity Shop", it falls back on an English countryside, villages and buildings that have not changed at all since the story was written. The cast is certainly a solid one, and while it may fall below the standard of David Lean's films, as a budget-conscious adaptation of a classic, it's a good deal better than the Monogram "Oliver Twist" or "Jane Eyre".

I SEE ICE (Associated Talking Pictures-Ealing Studios, 1938) Directed by Anthony Kimmins; a Basil Dean Production; Scenario: Anthony Kimmins, Austin Melford; Music and lyrics: George Formby (and others); Camera, Ronald Neame and Gordon Dines; 8 reels

With George Formby (George Bright); Kay Walsh (Judy Gaye); Betty Stockfield (Mrs Hunter); Cyril Ritchard (Paul Martine); Garry Marsh (Galloway); Frederick Hartwell (Detective); Ernest Sefton (Outwaste); Gavin Gordon (Singer); Gordon McLeod (Lord Felstead); Archibald Betty (Colonel Hunter); Frank Leighton (Manager); Roddy McDowall (Schoolboy on train)
We have written a great deal about George Formby in the past, so we won't repeat ourselves here other than to reiterate, for the benefit of newcomers, that Formby was, roughly speaking, a music-hall derived equivalent of Harry Langdon. Also, incredibly, he was Britain's No.1 boxoffice star for several years. His affinity to Langdon is stressed here by his role, that of an inept cameraman, paralleling Langdon in "Smile Please".

Very few of the Formby films saw release in this country, though they crept in later, still to remain largely unshown, as parts of tv packages. "I See Ice" needless to say, did not get a U.S. release. It's from Formby's best (and middle) period, 1938-1942, when his films took on an added gloss and care as befitting a star of his magnitude. Associated Talking Pictures, with its impressive Art-Deco trademark, was really Baling Studios, but before they expanded to include their own distribution set-up. At the time, they were releasing through Associated British Film Distributors, a very enterprising independent company that by a fluke that has never been explained managed to snare a number of major MGM films for reissue in the early 40's.

"I See Ice" is good, above-average Formby, without being one of his best. There is less prolonged slapstick than usual, and his celebrated double entendre, mildly "blue" material somewhat milder than usual -- although this is academic, since his broad Lancash ire accent made much of his cheerful vulgarity unintelligible here anyway. Scenarist Austin Melford, a Formby regular, also worked on "The Mill on the Floss", while producer Basil Dean was married to one of the stars of "Mill", Victoria Opper. He produced most of her films actually, and together they were a kind of second-string Wilcox-Neagle team.

A bonus of "I See Ice" is the supporting cast. Kay Walsh and Betty Stockfield (whose fluent if English-accented French kept her busy in French movies too) make a neat pair of leading ladies, and of course a major delight is the comic villainy of Cyril Ritchard. While of course he was (and still is!) an enchantingly urbane and debonair player on stage, the movies made but little use of his flair for musical comedy. His movies in fact were quite sparse, and usually cast him as serious lechers (as in Hitchcock's "Blackmail") or comic ones, as here. It's doubly a pity since British movies of the 30's were full of imitation Jack Buchanans, whereas Ritchard could have held his own as an equal. It's a little hard to believe, as this plot would have us, that Ritchard is both a successful musical-comedy skater and an ice-hockey star -- but Ritchard's own versatility is such that we don't entirely rule it out.

Watch for Roddy McDowall - diminutive but recognisable - as a schoolboy in the railway train sequence near the beginning.

Wm. K. Everson