Tonight's is our last program for the season. We'll resume in late September, and mailings will go out around Sept. 15th.

We apologize for the unexpected shift to a different room this evening; there is unusual demand for the auditorium at the moment. In the Fall, we should be back to our regular venue without further complications.

Two programs back our print of a Sennett, "A Sea Dog's Tale", had been mislaid and we expected to replace it and add it to tonight's program. Unfortunately, time has whizzed by without there ever being the chance to put the wheels in motion. So we've moved in another (and more appropriate) short tonight, and will use the Sennett with our first silent program in the Fall.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two British rural wartime comedies

May 8, 1978

With the exception of the deliberately escapist costume romances, a cycle launched with "The Man in Grey", virtually all British wartime production reflected one aspect of the war, even if only indirectly. The big name comedians - Will Hay, George Formby, Arthur Askey, The Crazy Gang etc. - all tilted with spies, saboteurs and wartime action, much as Bob Hope did over here. And if there were less British "home front" comedies that could be considered parallels to Hollywood's "The More The Merrier" and "San Diego I Love You", then the balance was restored by a whole group of charming, relaxed, light-weight rural comedies, of which tonight's pair is very typical. Not only did these films have a kind of soft-sell propagandist value in showing some of the traditions and values for which the war was being fought, but they also had the economic advantage of being relatively inexpensive. Much of them was shot on location, and demands on studio space were not excessive. Moreover, they were in a sense, escapist comedies too. They had contemporary references, as they had to, and usually some aspect of the war was a catalyst to the action.

On the other hand, they did not depend on the war for plot material; with a little simple reshuffling, both of tonight's films could have taken place equally well in a peace-time milieu.

DON'T TAKE IT TO HEART (Two Cities-General Film Distributors, 1944; US reh: 1949)

Written and directed by Jeffrey Dell; produced by Sydney Box; Camera; Eric Cross; Music, Mischa Spoliansky; Art Director, Vetchinsky; 91 mins.


Unpretentious and little publicized, the quiet yet sprightly charm of "Don't Take It To Heart" made it an unexpected hit in England, even though it was surrounded on all aides by big prestige British films released at approximately the same time: "This Happy Breed", "Fanny By Gaslight", "A Canterbury Tale", "The Way Ahead", "2000 Women", "Love Story" and "Mr. Emmanuel". In the U.S. it was ultimately quite popular too, but it was hurt by having its release delayed here by five years, and having to compete with the more elaborate British comedies that had come along in the meantime. It was made at a fairly small studio in HammerSmith, a London suburb, with of course a great deal of outdoor location work. The spacious sets that were erected in that quite small studio are most ingenious. It's a quiet little film, depending more on charm and a marvellous collection of characters - not least Ernest Theisiger in one of his most delightful studies of addle-brained pomposity - than on its story, although it's worth stressing that it's quite the most light-hearted of the generally rather heavy cycle of ghost stories that came from the British studios during the war years. Co-stars Greene and Medina were married at the time; Greene had had an earlier Hollywood career, and of course returned there later. Medina also moved to Hollywood after the war, and is now Mrs Joseph Cotton.

intermission
THE GREEN GIRDLE (Strand Films, 1942) Produced by Basil Wright; Directed by Ralph Rees; Camera, Jack Cardiff; Music, Richard Addinsell; narrated by Bruce Belfrage and Robert McBurnett; in Technicolor; 10 mins.

Neither a swashbuckler nor a exploitation movie, this charming little documentary seems an ideal introduction to "Tawny Pipit". A quiet little song of praise to the parks and woodlands surrounding London, it too was a propagandist film in its way. Yet it can stand alone regardless of period and there is in fact nothing about it to give it a time-slot until the closing lines of narration, which stress the therapeutic value of the great outdoors to wartime Londoners.

TAWNY PIPIT (Two Cities- General Film Distributors, 1944) US rel: 1947
Written and directed by Bernard Miles and Charles Saunders; produced by Miles; Music, Noel Newton-Wood; Camera, Eric Cross; Art Director, Vetchinsky; 80 minutes
With Rosamund John, Niall MacGinnis, Bernard Miles, Jean Gillie, George Carney, Lucie Mannheim, Christopher Steele, Brefini O'Rourke, Wylie Watson, John Salew, Marjorie Rhodes, Ernest Butcher, Grey Blake, Joan Sterndale-Bennett.

A film from the same studio as "Don't Take It To Heart", with many of the same technicians and players, "Tawny Pipit" went into release about a month earlier. It is by far the better known of the two films, has the kind of plot that would eventually come to be regarded as a typical "Ealing" plot, and is often coupled in fond memory with the lovely Powell-Pressburger film "I Know Where I'm Going". Filmically, there is no comparison, and as a piece of superb craftsmanship the Powell film is way out in front, but the charm and the delight in the fresh air and the countryside are certainly common to both films.

"Tawny Pipit" might well have been a much better picture under certain circumstances; it cries out for Technicolor; and it could also benefit from a better director. Bernard Miles was a good character actor who more than once tried his hand at writing and directing, starting with early wartime Ministry of Information shorts. His best known film was "Chance of a Lifetime", an interesting film about labor relations. Unfortunately, he was never too subtle about "messages", and there are "hard-sell" elements (at least, by British standards) in "Tawny Pipit" which are a little grating. Occasionally Miles will underline a point already sufficiently made, and the footage with the Russian lady sniper seems particularly un-British in its heavy-handed quality, although it should be remembered that Britain had been living for a long time under the threat of invasion, so that the propagandist point that English farm girls might have to be equally adept at picking off Hunns was not entirely out of place. And at that, the sequence is far less objectionable than the tasteless sequence in "Stage Door Canteen" where Sam Jaffe introduces the Russian lady sniper -- next to Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Coventry, possibly the grimmest moment of World War Two.

No, with color and a more experienced director, "Tawny Pipit" might well have been a better film, but it might also have had more responsibilities in order to recoup its greater cost. That might have meant more of a story, and perhaps stronger boxoffice names, robbing the film of the relaxed, easy-going charm that it now has. One would particularly regret losing Rosamund John from this particular English landscape, even though she was perhaps a shade too plump, and by no means the polished actress that she seemed to become almost overnight in her next film, 1945's "The Way to the Stars". Jean Gillie, another charming open-air lass, like Patricia Medina trekked out to Hollywood. Monogram tried hard to turn her into a sexpot in "Decoy" and it didn't work; unfortunately she died quite young, her full potential unrealized, but she did add a great deal of charm and beauty to some 20 British films between 1931 and 1945.