THE NEW SCHOOL
ASPECTS OF THE THIRTIES
PROGRAM TWO

GERMAN INFLUENCE ON THE BRITISH FILM

"ST. MARTIN'S LANE" (1939; U.S. release title: "Sidewalks of London")
A Pommer-Laughton-Mayflower Production for Paramount release;
Producer: Erich Pommer; Director, Tim Whelan; Original story & screenplay by Clemente Dane; Camera: Jules Kruger.

Erich Pommer, who died in May of last year, was one of the most remarkable and prolific producers (and occasionally a director) that the cinema has ever given us. Most prominent among the great German classics of the '20's, he also worked in Hollywood during the late '20's and '40's, in France, and in the thirties in England. "St. Martin's Lane" is perhaps the best of the trio of British films that he made with Laughton. A curious film, it has echoes of Lewis Milestone's "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" and more marred anticipations of Chaplin's "Limelight". One can also easily imagine it as a silent German vehicle for Jannings, and indeed many shots can be seen as parallels to similar shots from Jannings' "Variety". Pommer seems to have had a happy knack of drawing from both Laughton and Jannings some of their best, most restrained, and least bravura performances. Although (like "Transatlantic Tunnel") written by Clemente Dane, the theatrical sentimentalism of "A Bill of Divorcement", "St. Martin's Lane" is surprisingly free if not of sentiment then of the melodramaticism one expects from its basic plot. Though somewhat disconcerted, the film is less Germanic than many earlier British talkies, and there are some interesting uses of direct cuts which again stress that the New Wavers have done a lot of borrowing from the Old Masters. Some shots of a production number are rather curiously muted in, indicating that it may have been planned as a number on its own, not used, and salvaged by being slotted in as establishing material. Vivien Leigh, youthful and lovely, seems superficial at first, but is fascinating us all since the part ultimately calls for such an interpretation.

"TRANSATLANTIC TUNNEL" (Gaumont-British, 1939) Directed by Maurice Elvey; screenplay by Kurt Siodmak, L. de Garde Peach and Clemente Dane from "Der Tunnel" by P. Kellerman; Camera: Gunther Krampf;
Art direction, Eino Metzner; music: Louis Levy
An imaginative glimpse into the future back in 1935, "Transatlantic Tunnel" dates rather more than 1926's "Metropolis". Presumably its period is around 1950, since at one point Dix is credited with having built the England-France tunnel in 1940. (It would have been complete just in time to facilitate the German invasion; such a tunnel is however much more viable in the planning stage). The film is a fascinating combination of English and American film, both of them being most undramatically (especially in the visual sense) Germanic. In addition, it is a remake of a rather stodgy French film, "The Tunnel", which starred Jean Gabin. If it lacks anything, it is showmanship; all too often we leave the tunnel to become immersed in conventional marital misunderstandings. But the great scenes in the tunnel, with their futuristic machines and echoes of "Metropolis", are fine stuff, and the climax of the blasting through an undersea volcano is a real thriller. It's quite reassuring to note that in 1935 Gaumont took a far less pessimistic view of Britain's future than Alexander Korda did in "Things to Come". As the Prime Minister and defender of the Empire's honor (against un-named but ominous "Eastern"powers) George Arliss, in monocle and cutaway plays Disraeli all over again, although the USA's Congress is curiously shrunken and cramped! —— Wm. K. Everson ——