A Rose-Colored Look at World War One

"CHANCES" (First National, 1931) Directed by Allan Dwan
Screenplay by Waldemar Young from the novel by Hamilton Gibbs
Camera: Ernest Haller; Art Director, Edras Hartley.
With: Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Rose Hobart, Anthony Bushell, Mary
Forbes, Holmes Herbert, Tyrrell Davis, Edmund Breon, Harry Allen,
Edward Morgan, Florence Britton, Jeanne Fenwick, Jameson Thomas,
Billy Bevan.

Although director Dwan has recently been adopted by the "Cahiers du Cinema" faculty, he is best remembered in the U.S. for his silent
Douglas Fairbanks spectacles. Actually though, none of his best
work can be found on less pretentious levels: Shirley Temple's
"Heidi" the lovely minor piece of Americans "Man to Man", and
tonight's film, "Chances" is a sort of W-L "Beau Geste" - simple
and romanticised, and the kind of film that just isn't made any more
because half-hour tv plays have done it to death. To be quite honest,
it is basically a silent film with dialogue added, all larger-than
life, full of big emotions, nobility, sacrifices, novelistic twists
of fate and grandiose dialogue, backed up by the Vitaphone orchestra's
most sentimental themes. It's old-style movie-making if you wish,
but done with flair and style, and taken in the right spirit, both
an exciting film and a moving one. Physically it is quite handsome:
Haller's camerawork is first-class, standing sets are utilised to
add production values, and if the initial barrage scenes smack a
little too much of the studio (especially with the mike shadow well
in view), then the really spectacular climax, obviously done with
army cooperation, more than compensates. It's a rousing sequence,
helped along by the judicious lifting of a few clips from Richard
Barthelmess' silent "The Patent Leather Kid". "Chances" (what a
nondescript title for such a film) was Douglas Fairbanks' first
starring role. But the public then was buying mature stars (Farrmore,
Robinson, Warner Baxter) or brash youngsters (Cagney, Pat O'Brien),
and boyish charm was not apparently a boxoffice commodity then. It
took "The Prisoner of Zenda", some six years later, to really make
an important star out of the younger Fairbanks.

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"THE SPY IN BLACK" (Korda-London Films, Columbia 1939)
Directed by Michael Powell; produced by Irving Asher; screenplay
by Emeric Pressburger and Roland Pertwee from a story by J.
Storer Clouston; Camera: Bernard Browne; Music: Miklos Rosza
With Conrad Veidt, Valerie Hobson, Sebastien Shaw, Marius Goring,
June Duprez, Athole Stewart, Agnes Laughton, Helen Haye, Mary Morris,
Cydll Raymond, George Summers, Hay Petrie, Grant Sutherland, Robert
Rendell, Margan Moffatt, Torin Thatcher, Bernard Miles, Skelton
Knaggs, Kenneth Warrington. (U.S. title: "U Boat 29")

"The Spy in Black" was an odd film to bring out in 1939, with Britain
on the brink of war with Germany. Released after the war began, it
proved a surprising commercial success. Possibly with the full
realities of war still in the future, the British found comfort in its
"civilized" attitude to war, and in its depiction of the German
as a sympathetic and gentlemanly opponent. It was one of the last
of Michael Powell's knight "little" movies, with a stress on location
work and seascapes, before he teamed up more fully with his writer
Emeric Pressburger to launch those interesting but pretentious
"prestige" features that ranged from "Black Narcissus" and "Colonel
Blimp" to "Stairway to Heaven" and "The Red Shoes". "Spy" is not
exactly full of surprises, but it is a literate film and a well-
played one. Veidt, almost repeating his "Dark Journey" performance,
and Valerie Hobson - midway between her Mrs Frankenstein and
Mrs Profumo character - a good team - were a real asset in the
more conventional (and even more successful) "Contraband". Most of
all though, "The Spy in Black" scores on its pictorial elements,
many of which have their roots in the silent German cinema.
Veidt, rigid against a wall, one with his own shadow, recalls his
own image in the 1919 "Cabinet of Dr. Caligari", while as prowls
the misty boat in his black hat and cape, he conjures up memories
of the 1922 "Nosferatu". But "The Spy in Black" has a Hitchcockian
humor too, and though largely forgotten, stands the test of time
rather better than Carol Reed's "Night Train" and other more famous
British melodramas of the early years.

----- William K. Everson -----