"WENT THE DAY WELL?" (Ealing Studios-United Artists, 1942) Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti; produced by Michael Balcon; screenplay by John Dighton, Angus MacPhail and Diana Morgan from a story by Graham Greene; Music, William Walton; Camera, Wilkie Cooper; Special Effects, Roy A. Turner, producer. Run time: 90 minutes


"Went The Day Well?" is not only one of Cavalcanti's finest works, but also one of the best yet least appreciated British films of and about World War 2. Rural England is attractively photographed and its day-to-day life quite realistically evoked. For once the characters do not walk through the film like caricatures, and while it seems broadly Hitchcockian in theme, its style seems more related to Luis Bunuel. In a sense, it is an updated equivalent of the World War One anti-Hum scouting movies. It is more restrained, more sensible, and has an amiable sense of humor - but the intent is the same. Whereas before the Hun appeared as an outright beast, here he appears initially beneath a veneer of civilization, which is only gradually stripped away to reveal the same beast beneath. To test the film realizes the obviousness of its own device, one counteracts the humor, Muriel George, trying to soap-box a German, tells him that she doesn't need that propaganda; according to babies on bayonets. "Babies on bayonets?" muses the German, "What would be the advantage?" Made at the height of the invasion scare in England, the film propagated for vigilance and against careless talk, and added the moral-booster of telling the tale in flashback from after the victorious winning of the war. Like so many British films of the period, and especially the wholly or partially Government sponsored ones, it seems to suggest that England was a honeymoon of fifth column activity, with aristocrats and pubs being an incredible net of espionage which is presumably now lying dormant awaiting the arrival of another Fascist to launch them into action. If the intention was to make one suspicious of one's neighbor it didn't work, because no normal Englishman really trusts his neighbor anyway, and automatically suspects him without Government prodding. But once the mystery here is cleared up, there is unique solidarity on both sides. The Germans, no longer forced to masquerade as urbane Britons, scowl, revert to guttural accents, make a point of calling each other "Schmidt" or "Hueller," and snarl "Ach!" whenever anything goes wrong. And the British come through true-blue all down the line, aristocratic dowagers and humble post-mistress both lay down their lives without a murmur's hesitation, and the manor-house maid - named Bridget of course - gallantly keeps everybody's spirits up by serving tea under fire. If I tend to leitmotiv over details in such a good film, it is perhaps because World War Two is now both ancient history and small potatoes, so that one can regard it more from its entertainment than propagandist values. So much of the old Hitchcock (and the old Launder and Gilliat) situations and dialogue are absorbed into the film: messages for help scribbled on the bottom of egg, German agents smiling, "officer red tape" and the like. "Always Be an England"; a boy running through a rain-soaked wood to bring help. But if there's a dominance of Hitchcock influence, there's at least a hint of Cavalcanti's old French avant-garde background too. There are moments of savagery which happen when one least expects them, and the final battle scenes are a strange mixture of jingoistic "indomitable Britannia" and plain unvarnished documentary austerity. From its "Our Town" opening through its building of suspense paralleled by laughter, it's an odd film yet a powerful one. However with its not difficult to see why neither critics nor public liked it at the time. Perhaps it was rejected it was too some more of the cinema's lack for being uninformative on a subject then considered of prime concern. (Moreover, there were other semi-official "scare" thrillers being made at the time). City audiences no point of identification; they were more concerned with mass bombings than infidelity by spies. And for rural audiences, the war was too cut and dried for them to take it seriously; to them, the enemy was on the front line, and if he ever appeared in England it would be obviously, dashing from a parachute. Complicated Fritz Lang schemes like this one were beyond their ken, and perhaps not without reason. Certainly the authentic uncouthness, and the synthetic but heartless politeness displayed by Basil Sydney et al could never be convincingly duplicated by any real bona-fide spy. He'd probably start chatting to his co-passenger on a train, and they'd know right away that he was a foreigner. One word of explanation regarding the Germans' determination to stop the ringing of the church bells. In wartime England church bells were banned, their use being preserved solely as a warning of invasion. Needless to say, more than one British wartime comedy ("Hi Gang!" for example) used this as a plot device, setting the bells off by accident and mobilizing the whole country thereby.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --
"THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME" (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel; Produced by Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper; Executive Producer, David O. Selznick; screenplay by James Ashmore Creelman from the prize-winning short story by Richard Connell; Camera: Henry Gerrard; Music by Max Steiner; 65 minutes

With: Leslie Banks, Joel McCrea, Fay Wray, Robert Armstrong, Noble Johnson, Steve Clemento, Dutch Hendrian, "M. B. Davidson, James Flavin, Hale Hamilton

Although Richard Connell was an experienced screen writer, he never worked on movie adaptations of his own short stories (which ranged from tonight's film to "Brother Orchid") and indeed his originals are pithy, punchy tales, models of brevity, with no thought of moulding them to potential movie use. His brilliantly written "The Most Dangerous Game" can be read comfortably in half-an-hour; there is no romantic interest, an economy of detail and an underplayed climax in which the entire final sequence takes place off-screen (or off-page) and is disposed of via one line of dialogue, Creelman's screenplay - while it has been criticized for the conventional introduction of a heroine in distress - is a brilliantly controlled expansion, translated into thoroughly cinematic terms, but still retaining the indiluted concentration on the story itself so that at six reels it is quite certainly the tightest and most compact thriller ever made. Produced while Schoedsack and Cooper were also working on "King Kong", it benefits not only from the overlapping production aura of that film, but from the collaboration of many of the same technicians, the same sets (the log from which Kong shakes the hapless sailors is put to good use here) and identical shots or editorial touches in the building of tension. Above all there is another stunning Max Steiner score - quite probably the best score written for any movie to that date, when musical scores were still regarded with suspicion as an artificial contrivance. Just as the score for Kong was revamped by Rko through the years, so was the "Game" score frequently pillaged - most notably in "Michael Strogoff". The film's script also utilizes the basic and classic construction of "Kong" - a measured but unrelenting build-up, and then a release of physical shock and action that is maintained on an almost hysterical level right to the end, (Creelman worked on "Kong" is scenario too). Taking its full-blooded melodrama quite seriously, it never shrinks from grim (yet non-gory) physical details (the crunching bones in the final fight are another happy borrowing from "Kong"), and scores particularly with the magnificently theatrical lines delivered with such outstanding bravura by Leslie Banks. Possibly his performance was even more effective in 1932 (for this was his first film and his face and personality were totally new). It's certainly "has", but brilliant ham - the kind of succulent ham that Lugosi should have brought to "Dracula", but didn't quite manage, bless his heart.

Several times re-made (often unofficially, in pirated "B" films like "Kill or Be Killed", and in a current "B" proposed sexed-up version in Germany) is supposed to be being prepared for a new American version - though Warren Beatty, its one-time owner and star-to-be, has withdrawn from it. The first official remake was "A Game of Death" (1946), done extremely well by Robert Aldrich. The second version followed the original faithfully, shot by shot, line by line, for the first third - and then diluted itself by injecting an additional reel of delaying-tactics plot-line in order to lengthen the film. Edgar Barrier, as the villain, delivered Banks' identical lines to somewhat less effect, and instead of a Russian was now a German, mouthing Nazi slogans. Though well directed and edited, it had a totally studio look to it. (The original was wholly studio-made too, but never showed it). The climax offered an interesting lesson in editing too, that many original shots were re-used, and at one point Noble Johnson literally tossed himself in the fog! (He was re-cast in a similar role in the new version). The last "official" version, "Run for the Sun", made in color in the early 50's, proved the validity of Connell's story and the original film version by recapitulating all the virtues of both: it was twice as long, and the basic story (with Richard Widmark as the hunter, and Trevor Howard's villain now transformed into an escaped Nazi war criminal) didn't even get under way until the second half!

--- William K. Everson ---