THE NEW SCHOOL  FILM SERIES 15: Program 3  October 20, 1972

"NELL Gwyn" (British and Dominions Films, 1934) Produced and directed by Herbert Wilcox; Screenplay by Miles Malleson; Camera, Freddie Young; Music by Edward German and Philip Barham; released, United Artists; 7 reels With: Anna Neagle, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Jeanne de Casalis, Laurence Anderson, Miles Malleson, Helena Pickard, Esme Percy, Moiré Birrell, Hugh Wright, Abraham Sofaer, Craignall Sherry, Hay Petrie.

Obviously - and successfully - planned as a follow-up to Korda's enormously popular "The Private Life of Henry the Eighth," "Nell Gwyn" is quite one of the liveliest of the Wilcox films of the early 30's, and in many ways one of the best films of a director who was prolific, commercially successful, but usually rather stodgy and unadventurous as a film-maker. If it lacks the great charm of his silent version of the twenties, it is due largely to the fact that Anna Neagle is no Dorothy Gish. (Miss Gish was quite captivating as Nell, one of her best roles) Fortunately, Miss Neagle is a former chorus girl on the threshold of being one of the "great ladies" of the British screen - "tries" too hard and never really relaxes with the role. Nevertheless, it's a sprightly and often quite bawdy romp; initially it was heavily censored for its U.S. release, although by today's standards it seems quite innocuous of course. Historically it makes an interesting comparison with the more recent "Cromwell," although we're still missing a film (what a pity! Carl Dreyer never made one!) on Cromwell's Rendever Davidson period, when England put through an era of puritanism and tyrannical austerity that was directly responsible for the sun-loving laxity that was to characterise Charles the 2nd's reign. The film was economically made, but all of its budget shows on the screen, and it's an interesting forerunner to the two much more elaborate "queen Victoria films that Neagle and Wilcox were to make together in the late 30's. A lively musical score helps it quite a bit, as do the many familiar faces in the cast - including Jeanne de Casalis (better known on British radio, where she specialised in dithery Billie Burke comedy, oddly enough (because they seem so mismatched) the wife of Colin Clive.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

"REH MUST FIGHT" (RKO, 1933) Directed by Edgar Selwyn; screenplay by C. Gardner Sullivan from an original by Reginald Lawrence and S.K. Lauren; Camera, George Folsey. 7 reels
With Diana Wynyard, Lewis Stone, Phillips Holmes, Ray Robson, Ruth Selwyn, Robert Young, Robert Crieg, Hedda Hopper, Donald Pileway, Mary Carlisle, Luis Alberni.

Certain films which are neither entertainment blockbusters nor films of great artistic worth still warrant revival for a variety of reasons: as an early landmark in a director or actor's career, or - as in this case - because of quite astonishing content. Based on a play, "Men Must Fight" doesn't really work dramatically. It starts off as rather predictable soap opera, then suddenly changes gears and becomes "big" and "meaningful," presented on an ambitious canvas - but it moves so fast, and remains so theatrical, that motivations (Lewis Stone's is especially never really have time to be developed properly, nor does its speed allow one time to get emotionally involved with the characters. Made in 1933, when there was a fashion for both pacifist-inclined anti-war films, and anti-crime films advocating police-state methods, it incredibly predicts a U.S.-"European" war of 1940, coupled with student revolts, demonstrations and fervently anti-war feelings which parallel to an incredible degree of attitudes that have been boiling out of the Vietnam war. If nothing else, it reminds us that no matter how fervent are the emotions of current political climates, those same emotions have been created before.
Diana Wynyrd plays gracefully and skillfully in her then traditional role of idealistic family leader and steadier-of-the-tiller; "Cavalcade" and "Rasputin and the Empress" were playing concurrently in Broadway movie theatres when this third vehicle for her exceptional talents joined them; Phillips Holmes' role is rather poignantly prophetic, since he was killed during World War II while serving with the RAF. The New York bombing scenes are oppressed in opulence created Empire State Building, already assaulted by King Kong a month or so earlier, is mostly demolished; Edgar Selwyn, who directed, has a career worthy of detailed investigation one of these days. A former actor and playwright of note - he starred in his own plays - he retired from the stage in 1913, and went into films. Hollywood logic calling for stage-trained directors to work on talkies, he found a whole new career opening up for him in 1929, when he made a number of generally good profitable though admittedly never outstanding films for RKO until 1934. We can't alas duplicate the added attractions that accompanied the film at the now obliterated Capitol Theatre in 1933. The stage show included Bing Crosby, Milton Berle and Eddie Duchin's Orchestra.

----- Wm. K. Everson -----