Two Off-beat and unfamiliar comedies

"TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN" (Ealing Studios, 1941) Director: Marcel Vernel; Produced by Michael Balcon; Asst. Producer, Basil Dearden; screenplay by Austin Helford from the play "As You Are" by Wells Root and Hugh Miller; Camera, Gordon Dines; edited by Robert Hamer; 8 reels

To U.S. audiences, George Formby is the least familiar of the many British comedians of the thirties and early 40's. His broad Lancashire accent and regional humor made him a dubious risk for export, though much later his films were often included (though rarely actually exhibited) in packages sold to US television. Enormously popular in England, he was something of a British parallel to Harry Langdon. He was however much more of a genuine "innocent" then Langdon, this innocence even extending to the characters and harmless manner in which often outrageously blue double-entendres crept into his songs. His earlier films were strong on comedy-thrill slapstick situations, but Ealing films in the thirties lacked the polish and production expertise of the bigger Gaumont-British company, whose comedies with Will Hay and Jack Hulbert tended to be better. Critics in 1941 felt that "Turned Out Nice Again" was quite one of Formby's best, and liked the way it got away from his traditional slapstick and gave him better shot at characterisation values. The fans however liked their Formby "as you were", and much preferred his immediately pastique roles as "Mr. Cooper" - a fact if unmodified was evident in all his traditional action-oriented routines. On this occasion the critics were right, and "Turned Out Nice Again" in retrospect does prove to be one of the best (if least typical) Formby films, despite its minimising of sight-gag material. It has pep, pace, restrained pathos and plenty of the harmless "blue" material - both in song and dialogue - that had become a Formby trademark. It was his last film at Ealing, and his subsequent seven films (all for Columbia) all failed to sustain (let alone develop) the essentials of the Formby personality. Ironically, Will Hay was brought in from Gaumont-British to replace him, and Hay too, away from his familiar alma-mata, made less interesting films. The charming leading lady is Peggy Bryan, whose very spare film appearances also included the comedy sequence in "Dead of Night". Biographical material on her is virtually non-existent, but the resemblance to Jane Bryan, a Werner starlet of the same period, is so strong that one can't help but conjecture as to a possible relationship.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

"DIPLOMANTICS" (Rko Radio, 1935) Directed by William Seiter; produced by Marian C. Cooper; screenplay by Henry Meyers from an original story by Joseph L. Henckiewicz; Camera, Edward Cronjager; dances staged by Larry Cables; music by Max Steiner; 6 reels

Wheeler and Woolsey are among the most problematical of all screen comedies. Apart from the fact that 90% of the talent of the duo is vested in Wheeler, there is the inconsistency of the fact that some of their best routines are to be found in their weakest pictures, and that a good director (e.g., George Stevens) is no signpost to a good picture, and most of all that audience reaction to their kind of film depends greatly on mood and is quite unpredictable - the same film creating howls from one audience, stony silence from another. Because of a great deal of expressed interest in their films, we introduced them to our column earlier this year with "Hips Hips Go Round", the follow-up to "High Society" in which it was one of their best and glossiest films, with entertainment values transcending their own contributions. We move a little closer to the filmic "moment of truth" with "Diplomantics", an earlier and less polished work. Even if it doesn't wholly work as a comedy however (and that will depend entirely on the audience) it is academically quite a fascinating film, in that it bears an uncanny resemblance (structure, plot, surrealism of gags and perhaps even directorial approach) to the Marx Brothers' "Duck Soup" which it pre-dates by six months. It even has a gag, "in the trade" in the theatrical comic-Wilkie role, "Phyllis Barry" paralleling Lydia Roberti's Nata Machree's vamp role however reminds us that it also has roots in 1932's similar "Million Dollar Legs" which was also written by Henckiewicz. The delights include bright (and unpredictable) musical numbers, moments that clearly parody Mamoulian's "Love He Tonight" and a delicious running take-off on Charlie Chan by Hugh Herbert. The tasteful family-comedy specialist William Seiter seems a curious directorial choice for such bizarre mayhem, but once the rather dead opening sequence is disposed of, he keeps it constantly on the go.

-- Wm. R. Everson --