The New School Film Series Fifteen: Program 8

December 1, 1972

Good films about actors are surprisingly few: the British "The Comedy Kan", the French "La Fin Du Jour", Hollywood's "Stage Door", "The Actress"—and not too many more of real stature. Tonight's two films are not major contributions to this small genre, but they do have humor, charm and a large degree of truth.

RETURN TO YESTERDAY (Caped/Equaling/Associated British Film Distributors, 1939)

An extremely pleasing trifle that was lost in the shuffle even in England, where its release collided with the outburst of war, "Return to Yesterday" is another reminder of the compact and tasteful films that Robert Stevenson was turning out with remarkable regularity in his pre-Hollywood years. (Though never a name director, he was - next to Hitchcock and Victor Saville, one of Britain's major directorial assets). Its plot is little more than a vignetted, but the pleasant evocation of a British seaside town, the rich gallery of characters, the neat intertwining of pathos and comedy and the theatrical yet witty dialogue make it all a minor delight, with a great deal of the credit certainly due to the author of the original play, Robert Horley. It is well cast and acted, and Anna Lee (Mrs Robert Stevenson) here manages to keep her one irritating mannerism (an overuse of a sunny smile that ultimately becomes artificial, a trick even John Ford couldn't shake her loose from) well under control. Her performance here is quite one of her best. Although no great dramatic heights are scaled or plumbed, the film does occasionally achieve emotional effects that are quite moving, and the poignantly under-played climax has much of the sensitivity of the final scene of James Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella". Not the least enjoyable of the film's fringe benefits is a musical score which makes good use of such traditional British airs and ballads as "Uncle Tom Cobbly", "Barbara Allen" and "Will Ye No Come Back Again?".

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

"The Great Profile" (20th Century Fox, 1940) Directed by Walter Lang
Producer: Darryl F. Zanuck; Associate, Raymond Griffith; Screenplay by Milton Sperling and Hilary Lynn; Camera, Ernest Palmer; 8 reels.
With John Barrymore, Anne Baxter, Mary Beth Hughes, John Faye, Gregory Ratoff, Lionel Atwill, Ed Brophy, Illie Pung, John Valierie, Charles Lane, Marc Lawrence, Cecil Cunningham, Hal V. Pearse, William Fawley, Eddie Dunn, James Flavin, Dorothy Dearing, Lee Patrick, John Elliott.

John Barrymore admirers are usually saddened by this, his first capitulation to self-mockery, and they tend too to resent its tacitless exploitation of Barrymore's own contemporary problems - but it is so much fun, and such good if unsubtle Barrymore fare, that it's hard to bear the film any ill-will, especially so long after the fact. (The latter "Playmates" is something else again, and deserves all the scorn and oblivion that can be heaped on it!) If for nothing else, "The Great Profile" is an invaluable (if unofficial) record of what went on, day by day, during Barrymore's run of "Dear Children" - when every performance was different, and audiences came not to see the play, but what John Barrymore did to it - in terms of ad-lib dialogue, jovial drunken slapstick and sundry mayhem.

"The Great Profile" was actually intended as a quieter Adolphe Menjou vehicle; he was tactfully paid off, and the script revamped to match Barrymore's much publicised stage antics. Although it does tend to run out of steam towards the end, it has so much gusto and all kind of Barrymore's bizarreness - to say nothing of Fox's usual solid production values and a particularly strong supporting cast - that one can't but help regard it as a not unworthy part of the overall Barrymore chronicle. Whether by accident or design, Gregory Ratoff plays the same character that he did in "Broadway Through a Keyhole" seven years earlier. It's unsubtler than it deserves to be, and cries out for Preston Sturges' much surer blending of slapstick and satire, but on its worldish level it's still an enjoyable frolic that survives much better than might have been expected.

William K. Everson