I WAS A SPY (Gaumont-British, 1933; US release by Fox) Directed by Victor Saville; screenplay by W.P. Lipscomb and Ian Hay from the novel by Harthe MacKenna; camer, Charles Van Enger; 85 minutes, With Madeleine Carroll, Conrad Veidt, Herbert Marshall, Gerald Du Maurier, Edmund Gwenn, Donald Calthrop, Eve Moore, Nigel Bruce, May Agate, Darrita Hunt, George Merritt, Anthony Bushell.

In 1933, "I Was a Spy" was Britain's biggest boxoffice hit, eclipsing even Korda's "The Private Life of Henry the VIIIth. Although it is hardly an outstanding film, its success is easy to understand: after a period of doldrums for Britain's movie industry - the initial overly-ambitious early talkies giving way to the unfortunate period of "safe" and economically produced minor movies - the professionalism of "I Was a Spy", its outstanding cast, its tasteful direction and its solid story-telling values represented a real boost for the home product. Following its premiere at the Roxy in New York, the film was a considerable success in this market too. Although lavishly made and with some exciting action highlights, it is an evenly-paced film by today's standards, and its attitude to war as an arena in which codes of honor and morality are still important has been rendered obsolete by the recent succession of wars - official and otherwise - that have shaken us since. But the film is still sincere and satisfying, if not exactly overwhelming; its overall standards and certainly its extreme rarity make it a film well worthy of reappraisal via a series such as this one. (Quite incidentally, it is a remarkably similar film to the French "Harthe Richard, Au Service de la France" of 1937, with Edwige Feuillere and Erich von Stroheim in the equivalent of the Madeleine Carroll and Conrad Veidt roles.) Victor Saville recently recalled that when about to make the film he was much concerned by the legal problems confronting Rasputin and the Empress" and feared that any exploitation of the heroine's romantic dalliance with the German officer might bring forth a similar slander suit from the still-very-much alive Belgian spy. Accordingly, he contacted her, and to his relief found that she very much endorsed all of the film's approach. (Although the film's foreword by Winston Churchill may also have been a device to ward off second thoughts on her part!) Incidentally, the very handsome set created for the elaborate Belgian city square paid off quite well in later films; one cheapie, an adaptation of Dumas' "The Black Tulip", seems to have been made almost solely so that the bulk of the sets could be placed against the impressive set! We've run a number of Saville's British films in this series in the past; those of you who may have missed "Evergreen" (one of the best Jessie Mathews musicals) when we ran it, have a chance to catch up on it this September at the New Yorker Theatre.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

"THE MAN WHO PLAYED GOD" (Warner Brothers, 1931; released 1932) Directed by John G. Adolfi, scenario by Julian Josephson and Neude Howell from a play by Jules Eckert Goodman and a short story by Gouverneur Morris; camer, James Van Trees; 80 minutes.


Like "Disraeli" and "The Green Goddess", "The Man Who Played God" is a remake of an earlier silent Arliss film in turn based on an Arliss stage vehicle. (It was also remade a few years ago as "Sincerely Yours" with Liberace!) It's a surprisingly um-stagey film considering the preponderance of dialogue, though no attempt to conceal the theatrical origins and "curtains" is made. It's one of Arliss' best, and very much of a "vehicle", yet it also has a very solid plot on its own. Recognizing this and respecting it, Arliss doesn't tackle it with the same spirit of fun that he brought to "The Green Goddess". The performance is only occasionally larger than life; the brazen style is limited mainly to the earlier scenes, and for the most part Arliss is subdued and immensely effective, reminding us what a first-class actor he could be when he took a role seriously. It's a moving and poignantly effective for all its contrivance, and he does full justice to it. The film (Bette Davis' 7th, and her first for Warners) provided Davis with her first major break, and in her autobiography she is obviously sincere in her appreciation of the film and her gratitude to Arliss. John G. Adolfi, the director, came to Hollywood in the late silent period, specialising in stage-derived material, the all-star revue "The Show of Shows" and several Arliss vehicles. Although his films demonstrated a quite steadily improving absorption of sound technique he died in early 1933, before it could be ascertained whether he would ever become a first-class director of talkies.

William K. Everson