FRIENDS AND LOVERS (Rko Radio, 1931) Directed by Victor Schertzinger; Screenplay by Jane Murfin, Wallace Smith, from a story by Maurice de Kobra; Camera, Roy Hunt; 7 reels
With Adolphe Menjou, Erich von Stroheim, Laurence Olivier, Lili Damita, Hugh Herbert, Frederick Kerr, Blanche Frederici, Vadim Urazech, Jol Chend Mehra, Yvonne D'Arcey, Kay Deslys, Dorothy Wollert.

Ever since these film series began, we've been toying with the idea of playing this film - but held off, hoping it might turn up instead at a Museum or a theatre. Now it's ten years later and there has been no sign of it. We're all of us getting a little older - or older - and there's no guarantee that they'll play it either, so here it is. Arguably, it's the worst film we've shown; yet it's also far from being the least enjoyable! It's difficult to know quite how to take it, since nobody in the film seems clear on that point. Victor Schertzinger, an expert and veteran director as well as a composer of delightful music, obviously didn't strain himself too much in turning out a typical filmed play of the period. Menjou, ever the professional, plays it straight with urbanity and polish. Damita, all rouge, lingerie and gartered stockings, goes for all out sex appeal. Stroheim, obviously contemptuous of the whole farrago, decides to play it for its absurdity, relishing every ounce of his magnificence and using his monacle and whip as props whenever he has nothing else to do. Yet for all his jovial villainy, real menace is trotted out when it's needed too. There is little competition to all of his scene-stealing tricks, yet he takes no chances. Note how he milks even a simple letter-writing scene by testing the nib of the pen, and then grimacing at it. All of which brings us to the incredible performance by Laurence Olivier, who in most of his early American films seemed to be up against scene-stealers like Stroheim or Lionel Barrymore, and who quite understandably prefers not to be reminded of these films. His gallantry, old-school British manners, and curious writing, emerges as an oddly effeminate character. The dialogue unintentionally embellishes this by giving him one or two double-entendres that are real howlers. At one point he and Menjou are congratulating each other on having found the respective girls of their dreams, and rhapsodise about all the things they've been through together. Drunking sprees, wars, and now, finishes Olivier grandly, "we're in love together!" Virtually all of the dialogue is equally out-of-date; at one point a gentleman is defined as he who loans his polo ponies to a friend! Perhaps I'm unfair in making it sound hilarious, and I am certainly not suggesting that you approach it in a spirit of levity. Yet it really does defy being taken seriously, and it doesn't need to be so resolutely stagy. The locales range from Paris to the North West Frontier, but a big battle scene takes place entirely off-screen, and one suspects that the handsome fort set is there probably only because it was left over from Brenon's "Beau Ideal" of the same year. However, with that cast, and Menjou and Olivier vying for the whip-scarred remnants of Stroheim's marriage, it couldn't be anything but diverting. Don't feel too much of a traitor to the cause of old film if you chuckle occasionally; after all, Laurel & Hardy spotted it in its true colors right away, and used its story basis for their own "Bucks".

Q PLANES (Columbia, 1938) Directed by Tim Whalan; produced by Irving Asher; Screenplay, Brock Williams, Jack Whittingham, Arthur Virhey; Art Dir, Vincent Korda; Camera, Harry Stradling; Music, Muir Mathieson, 8 reels.
US title: "Clouds Over Europe".
With Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Valerie Hobson, George Curzon, Ian Fleming, George Merritt, Gus McNaughton, Sandra Storme, David Tree, Hey Petrie, John Longden, Roy Emerton, David Farrar, Raymond Lovell, John Laurie, Herbert Lomas, Leslie Bradley.

Although basically a fanciful, serial-like melodrama, "Q Planes" was elevated to a higher status by a tongue-in-cheek approach and especially by the richly comic performance of Ralph Richardson. His impact was such that critics both here and in England urged that he repeat the role in a whole series. (He wouldn't, and didn't). Olivier is pleasing, playing his straight hero role without his condescension showing, and Valerie Hobson is all cool elegance as always. The film was a big success in Britain, not least because a series of plane disasters made it oddly topical, and also because its modern swashbuckling answer to the growing threat of German aggression made it comforting (if unrealistic) propaganda. US reviews were frequently outstanding, though one NY critic oddly remarked that at last (1) it proved that the British could do a sense of humor. A handsome film, it was also an economical one. The front of Denham Studios serves as an airport exterior at one point, although most of the airport scenes appear to have been shot at the old deHaviland aerodrome at Weybridge.

--- W.m. k. eversen ---