Two by Carol Reed

PENNY PARADISE (Associated Talking Pictures-Ealing, 1937) Directed by Carol Reed; Produced by Basil Dean; scenario by Thomas Thompson, W.L. Meade and Thomas Browne from an idea by Basil Dean; camera, Ronald Neame and Gordon Dines; assistant director, Basil Dearden; music and lyrics, Harry Parr; Davies and Harry O'Donovan; 7 reels


"Penny Paradise" was Reed's 7th., and his last "little" picture. It immediately followed his first really big hit, "Bank Holiday", and was in turn followed by "Climbing High", "A Girl Must Live", "The Stars Look Down" and "Night Train to Munich". Like so many Ealing films of its period, it is more than a "B" yet by no means an "A" - a category of British film which existed in some profusion at the time, and which accounted no little for some of the economic problems of the British film industry.

Few of the bigger British films of the 30's commented on the depression years to the extent that Hollywood did, but the smaller films with their contemporary stories and working-class characters invariably did. By 1937, the worst of the British depression was over, but unemployment was still high, and this film reflects a good deal of the fear of unemployment and the "something for nothing" daydreams that are always rampant in such times. The plot hinges around the British football-pools, a system of legal, minimum-cost lottery, the absurdly over-enthusiastic British obsession with football may well be at least partially explained by this built-in get-rich-quick adjunct.

"Penny Paradise" has a lot of Frank Capra in it, particularly in the parade of "ordinary" people who become rather nasty when tainted by sudden money, but its closest American parallel is Preston Sturges' "Christmas in July". It's a pleasant, nicely written little film, often both moving and amusing, though it suffers a little from the too-obvious back projection of Liverpool river scenery, and the dialects are sometimes a little hard to pick up. Although this isn't a major point, the film is surprisingly "right" in the details of its interior sets - living rooms, fish-shops etc. The rather charming little round radio, looking somewhat like a pie of equipment from "Flash Gordon", is typical. There were relatively few new models in Britain in those days, and this one was specifically designed to look smart and streamlined, and to sell at low-cost. It was the standard radio set that most families owned, and a hardly little machine it was too.

Betty Driver, the film's heroine, was a kind of second-string Grace Fields who divided her time between radio, vaudeville and films, without having a big career in any of them. When one first sees her, one reacts as one would to the stock comedienne like Mary Wickes or Joan Davis; it seems impossible that this can be the film's heroine. Yet she has a warmth and pleasant singing style that wins one over. Jimmy O'Dea likewise had a mild career in films, and a bigger one in vaudeville. As far as his films go, he is probably best served here, in a supplementary role requiring little actual comic ability, but underplayed pathos in lieu of it.

THE WAY AHEAD (Two Cities-Eagle Lion, 1944) Directed by Carol Reed; Produced by Norman Walker and John Sutro; Associate Producer, Stanley Haynes; original story, Eric Ambler; screenplay by Ambler and Peter Ustinov; camera, Guy Green; music, William Alwyn; art direction, David Rawnsley, Arthur Lawson, edited by Fergus McDonnell; 10 reels (U.S. release by 20th Century Fox in 1945 in severely edited form; later retitled "The Immortal Battalion"; our print tonight is of the full British version).

With: David Niven, Stanley Holloway, Raymond Huntley, Penelope Dudley Ward, Billy Hartnell, James Donald, Peter Ustinov, John Laurie, Jimmy Hanley, Leslie Dwyer, Reginald Tate, Leo Genn, John Ruddock, Bromley Davenport, Alf Goddard, Trevor Howard, Renee Asherson, Mary Jerrold, Tessie O'Shea, Raymond Lovell, A.E. Mathews, Jack Watling, Lloyd Pearson, George Merritt, Hugh Burden, Eada Cameron, Eileen Erskine, Grace Arnold.

Apart from the documentary "The True Glory", "The Way Ahead" was Reed's only feature between "The Young Mr. Pitt" (1942) and "Odd Man Out" (1947). It came at a time when Britain was so short of propaganda war films, leaving them more and more to the expertise of Hollywood, and concentrating instead on the quieter dramas and less aggressively war-oriented films - "Waterloo Road", and the films like "A Canterbury Tale" and "The Tawny Pipit" that stressed rural charm and if they were propagandist at all, emphasised the national characteristics that the war was being fought to protect. It was also a period in which the British film had almost totally absorbed documentarian methods; "The Way Ahead" derived from both
Harry Watt's "Nine Men" and Reed's own army training film, "The New Lot". Never was a virtual documentary such a popular hit; Niven was the only concession to a boxoffice name, and he was such a major asset to the film that the word concession hardly applies. In England, "The Way Ahead" was a huge critical success, and an enormous commercial hit too - possibly the biggest of the war. It raised Niven's stock to such unprecedented heights that had he been free (he was then in the Forces) to cash in on his success, he might have followed it immediately to real super-stardom. Instead, reissues of second-rate Niven films ("Eternally Yours") minimised the impact, and when he was free to return to his career, the great opportunity had been lost. (Although his recent literary success seems to have made up for it!) The incredible success of "The Way Ahead", fine film though it is, is perhaps a little hard to understand today, but in 1944, when it was released coincidentally and fortuitously with the launching of the European invasion, it was a case of the right film coming along at exactly the right time. The British were tiring of a long war, and especially fed up were the draftees - not least because British Army modus-operandi was old-fashioned, full of traditional spit-and-polish, and such time-wasting and humiliating chores as having piles of coal dusted and actually polished when VIPs inspected the garrison! Here was a film that was a totally accurate picture of British army life, presented recognisable gripes with warmth and good humor, and somehow made it all seem worthwhile. Even the collection of "types" managed to avoid cliché, and there couldn't have been a man in the army then (or among the draftees - of the post-war army) who couldn't readily identify with at least one of them. (My own identification was rather spectacularly with Raymond Huntley, at least in the early stages. I was never able to duplicate his gradual efficiency, doubtless because I never had an officer like David Niven to inspire me) "The Way Ahead" concentrated on the reluctant inductees, pulled into the Army fairly late (by virtue of age or finally crumbling deferments) and is incredibly accurate in detailing their resentments and the gradual building of camaraderie and officer-enlisted men respect. The NCO types are magnificently drawn - Billy Hartnell is not only the "definitive" British army sergeant, but he also became the stock movie sergeant thereafter. Officers of the calibre of David Niven were unfortunately less commonplace, but after the film's release many officers consciously tried to emulate him (even to the growing of small moustaches) and if they didn't have the 'elan' to carry it off, at least the attempt was a humbling improvement.

So realistic is the film's documentary style and underplayed humor that the first big action sequence - a fire aboard a troopship - despite being a studio-made sequence, seems to carry all the authenticity of a newsreel, while the later and climactic battle scenes, though more conventional, likewise carry the impact of total realism. If one may quibble at all, it is only with the ambiguous ending. Its downbeat quality, if indeed it is that, hardly matters at all since one now accepts these men as a unit and not as individuals. But it is suggested that their courage and sacrifice is maintaining the old-fashioned traditions of glory and honor exemplified by the aged Chelsea Pensioners (who provide a kind of framework for the film) who really have no concept of modern war, or the reasons for it.

Apart from being at times a very funny movie, and an exciting one, it is also beautifully acted (James Donald's portrait of the malcontent who ruins the training exercise is particularly subtle) and in addition represents a unique coralling of absolutely top creative talent, ranging from major-talents-to-be (Ustinov, McDonald) to well-established but often wasted existing talents, such as Norman Walker, director of the lyrical 1935 film "The Turn of the Tide" that we played a few years back.

Much of the impact of "The Way Ahead" was squandered in this country where it was deplorably shortened (most of the real damage was done in the earlier sections where all of the civilian life scenes of the men were deleted), rendered much more serious and lacking in humor, and fitted out with an absurd "Gung Ho" narration by Quentin Reynolds. Tonight's print is, happily, of the complete original British version, and this is probably its first public showing in this country.

--- William K. Everson ---

The Spring schedules are available separately this evening.