THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 27: Program #1
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HIS LORDSHIP (Gaumont-British, 1936) Directed by Herbert Mason; screenplay by Maude Howell, Edwin Greenwood and L. Duarte Peach from the play "The Nelson Touch" by Neil Grant; Camera, Gunther Krampf; Art Director, Alfred Junge; released in the U.S. in 1937 under the title "A Man of Affairs". 7 rls With George Arliss, Rene Ray, Romilly Lunge, Jessie Victor, John Ford, Allan Jeayes, Lawrence Anderson, Bernard Marefield, John Turnbull, Basil Gill.

Having already run the very best of the George Arliss and Deanna Durbin films, we are now starting in on their second echelon films. The differences are noticeable but not distressing; the charm and personality of the stars carry them through even when there is an overall drop-off of quality.

Rather incredibly, Arliss made British films only at the end of his career, returning to Britain in 1935 to make five films (six, if one includes his guest star stint in "Transatlantic Tunnel") over a three year period. (Oddly enough, that other standard-bearer for British tradition, Leslie Howard, likewise only flirted with British films until the war years, when he threw himself wholeheartedly into acting and directing at home). All of Arliss' British films were derivative in plot and mood of his Hollywood work: historical biography, light-weight drama. "The Iron Duke" (as Wellington) was clearly (if not wholly successfully) intended to be in the tradition of "Voltaire" and "Alexander Hamilton", and "East Meets West" was a literal parallel to "The Green Goddess". Only in his last film, the melodramatic "Dr. Syn", was there a marked breaking from tradition. On the whole, the British films don't match their Hollywood forerunners, and it's difficult to know just why. They are carefully made, one or two even very elaborate; the plots are obviously tailored to Arliss. What is probably missing is the stock-company flavor of his Hollywood films. Many of them had been based on plays in which Arliss had starred, and in some cases had also been made as silent films. Arnold had British films basically intended to be in the tradition of "John G. Adolfi, Alfred Green) and his familiar supporting players - Ivan Simpson, Murray Kinnett, et c. He was always the star, but somehow in the British ones he seems more isolated from the rest of the cast: it's Arliss and his supporting cast, rather than Arliss and his friendly strolling players.

Nevertheless, the films are solidly Arliss vehicles, and since nobody ever went to an Arliss film for any reason other than to see him, nobody had much cause for complaint with his British entries which were extremely popular, if not quite the smash successes that his Hollywood films had been. Indeed, with "His Lordship" there is perhaps singular cause for rejoicing since there are two Arlisss for the price of one - a dual role in which the twins look exactly alike and sound exactly alike, but in order to exploit Arliss' perhaps somewhat exaggerated versatility, behave like opposite poles. The one that conducts himself like a slyly-ass foil for Bulldog Drummond is admittedly a rather unlikely choice (even by the peculiar British political standards of the day) for Foreign Secretary, but that's a minor quibble. It's quite a well-mounted comedy melodrama, with a good little story that holds attention on its own. And the experiment of making a film (with unintentionally) an interesting reflection on those long-gone days when the English sun shone brightly in colonial heavens, and the paternalism and condescension extended to "foreigners" was quite eye-brow raising. Arliss' foreign secretary, absent-mindedly remarking at one point "I was two minutes late for the last Eastern crisis" gets off some one-liners firmly intended to put the Arab nations in their place. A line like "You can't give way to natives -- they only ask for more, like David Copperfield" is very quickly topped by "There are only two things to do with Orientals -- first try persuasion, and then send an armed force!" A happy affair, in that Arliss' character is not supposed to be very bright -- but significantly, he is still in charge of his country's foreign policies at the film's close! All told, the Arabs take quite a beating, and one wonders how the film might fare today if reissued in a London increasingly populated by Arab sheiks and supported by their wealth.

A minor point of academic interest is the film's art direction by Alfred Junge, a canny designer who adapted his imagination to the limitations of his budgets, adding style and taste wherever possible, but never trying to swamp an unpretentious picture with grandiose sets and decor, biding his time until those days in the 40's when Powell and Pressburger were able to unleash his brilliant talent. But study the simple background decor used in the Eastern palace interiors at the beginning, and you'll spot ideas and motifs carried through to that unforgettable "Narcissus". Junge's art direction certainly helps to compensate for the lack of conviction occasioned by the many undeniably British actors cast as Arabs!

Incidentally, the film has no connection with two earlier British films (one silent, one early sound) also titled "His Lordship". Actually the working title of the film was the same as the play on which it was based, "The Nelson Touch". Gaumont, never one to waste a property, kept the title on file and dusted it off in the war years, conscripting it into service as a more British-oriented title for Howard Hawks' "Corvette K-225".

-- 10 Minute Intermission --
THREE SMART GIRLS (GROW UP) (Universal, 1939) Directed by Henry Koster
Produced by Joe Pasternak; Screenplay by Bruce Hannon and Felix Jackson;
Camera: Joseph Valentine; 8 reels

With Deanna Durbin, Nan Grey, Helen Parrish, Robert Cummings, Charles
Winninger, Nella Walker, William Lundigan, Ernest Cossart, Felix Bressart,
Kathleen Howard, Wade Boteler, Grady Sutton, Jack Mulhall, Doris Lloyd, Frank
Darin, Mary Treen, Edward Earle, William B. Davidson, Emmet Vogan, Bee
Flowers, Milton Kibbee, Frances Robinson, William Gould, Howard Hickman,
John Hamilton.

Although a huge popular success, made when Deanna Durbin was at the peak of
her popularity, "Three Smart Girls Grow Up" (a sequel to her first starring
vehicle) does show the first serious (though short-lived) faltering in the
Durbin formula. The problems are fairly obvious. A decision had already been
made to allow Deanna to "grow up" and encounter young romance. At the last
minute, and due to the continuing success of the four earlier Durbins, it was
decided to give the old child formula one more go-round -- and the rather
mathematical collection of tried-and-true plot material shows a bit too
obviously.

The film starts out beautifully. The credits are used -- and interrupted -- quite
creatively to get the film under way in the right spirit. Within minutes we're
into the typically luxurious, almost fairy-tale world of the early Durbins.
Charles Winninger's comedy is delightful, right from his entrance. And Deanna's
first song, "Invitation to the Waltz", is well sung and staged. But eventually
-- and quite quickly -- the plot has to be introduced, and that's where things
begin to go wrong. For one thing, it isn't really about Deanna at all, but
concerns her two sisters. Moreover, the "problem" isn't a monumental one, and
would doubtless have sorted itself out in time. Deanna is thrust into it;
rather than being the natural centre of it as she normally was, and for perhaps
the only time - certainly in her vintage 1936-1941 years -- approached the
borderline of being unsympathetic. Other feet are misplaced too; to further
the ends of the plot, parents are called upon to act in a totally illogical
fashion. And Robert Cummings was not yet an astute enough comedian to pull off
his role. As the guest at a party, he prattles incessantly about his dead
parents -- something that might have been written in a warm and human vein,
but which plays as boorish and even morbid.

These complaints are all relative. To anyone new to Durbin, the film is still
gay, charming, amusing, certainly entertaining. And it pulls itself up by its
own bootstraps before the climax. But the effort and the formula show
something that rarely happened with the Durbins. Luckily Universal realised
it too, and the next film, "First Love", was one of her very best (we've
already shown it, doubtless will repeat in due time) and the chain of good
pictures then continued unbroken until "It Started With Eve" in 1941 (shown
last season) which marked the end of the Durbin-Pasternak-Koster team.

But even if disappointing to those who know the best of Durbin, "Three Smart
Girls Grow Up" is still a most entertaining movie. If it's the weakest of her
best pictures, it's still far superior to virtually all of her post-'43 films
(w.th the exception of "Lady on a Train" and possibly also "Christmas Holiday")
In any event, it's good to see it again -- and to see the "other" smart
girls, Nan Grey and Helen Parrish. Parrish was replacing Barbara Read who
played the role in the first "3 Smart Girls" - not a bad move, since Read
looked so much like Deanna that while she made a convincing sister, she was
also a rather pointless one, charming though she was. Parrish does rather
more with the role, and also gives hints of the bitchiness that also made her
a useful "meanie" in other Durbin films, most notably "First Love".

William K. Everson

Next week: Two silents: THE SWAN (1924) with Ricardo Cortez, Adolphe Menjou
and Frances Howard, and CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH (1920) with Thomas
Meighan; piano scores by Stuart Oderman.

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