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Two major (but unfamiliar) British films of the '40's.

MILLIONS LIKE US (Gainsborough-General Film Distributors, 1943) Written and directed by Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder; produced by Edward Black; Camera, Jack Cox and Roy Foggell; Art Direction, John Bryan; 8 reels With Patricia Roc, Eric Portman, Gordon Jackson, Anne Crawford, Joy Shelton, Moore Marriott, Beatrice Varley, John Salew, John Boxer, Amy Veness, Terry Randall, Megs Jenkins, Valentine Dunn.

After many years as solo and collaborative screen-writers, most successfully on Hitchcock's "The Lady Vanishes" and Carol Reed's "Night Train to Munich", Launder and Gilliat became writer-director-producers in 1943. The first effort was "Millions Like Us" it was originally planned as a propaganda film for the Ministry of Information, done with their typical wit and inventiveness. "Millions Like Us", their first feature, was initially also planned as a propagandist film for the Government, but then expanded into a regular theatrical film. An instant critical success, it was not so quickly picked up by the public, then surfeited by war films and the increasing presence of both documentary films and the fiction and entertainment film into which documentary techniques had been absorbed. Actually the matting of documentary and fiction-narrative styles was to be work in progress in giving British film a quality all its own, but it happened very quickly and audiences, eager for entertainment during the war years, were not at all sure at first that they approved. Later however, when its stars were better known, it achieved a greater popularity. Told with warmth, humor and restraint, it is easily one of the most convincing evocations of that particular phase of the war. Audiences might support "Mrs Miniver" more because it was such grand-scale Hollywood schmaltz, and they certainly appreciated the sincerity of Hollywood's tribute to wartime Britons, but they didn't take it seriously for a moment. There was a great deal more truth and real sense of period in "Millions Like Us", rather surprisingly in fact since the comedy and especially the comedy-thriller ("Green For Danger", "Sealed Knot") had been Lauder and Gilliat's basic forte. One reason that "Millions Like Us" works so well is that its propaganda is soft-sell and its simple story manages to avoid most of the expected cliches. (Those that it doesn't, weren't yet cliches when the film was made!) Moreover, it was realistically upbeat at a time when such an attitude was sorely needed, but wouldn't have been believed if overdone. Another major reason for its ultimate success was that, like "The Way Ahead" and other British war films, it depicted the necessities of war as breaking down social barriers and class distinctions — something that the British always claim to want, but never seem to make work except during times of major crisis, like a war. (Britain of course is always in a state of secondary crisis; but after the major ones disappear, the old social barriers seem to creep back).

Patricia Roc, in her first major role following a few years in "B" pictures, is often quite touching, though considering what a beauty she was to become with proper grooming and treatment, is often quite unflatteringly photographed. However, this may have been a deliberate ploy to prevent her characterization carrying with it the aura that so many other stars of her generation and roles in parallel Hollywood films; Ginger Rogers in "Tender Comrade" for example. One more point, partially reducing our joy in having a fully complete print of the co-feature, the print of "Millions Like Us" is of a later British reissue which was slightly trimmed both to get it down to co-feature length, and to remove elements that were thought to date it too much. Thus Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne, making guest appearances as a kind of thank-you gesture to Launder & Gilliat (who had created their roles for "The Lady Vanishes" and "Night Train to Munich") are missing entirely, though their names still appear in the credits. Their appearances were brief, but spotted throughout the film as a linking device - travelling across the country by train, and commenting caustically on the latest war events or political moves. In the immediate post-war period when the film was reissued in England, these remarks might indeed have seemed dated and possibly unflattering, but today of course they could only add to the film's value as being a mirror to its time, and one regrets their excision all the more. The film was never released theatrically in the U.S.A., but has had some limited television exposure.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---


As most of the writer-director-producer teams, one half of the duo is really the driving force (with Launder and Gilliat it was Gilliat, with Brackett and Wilder, Wilder), a fact easily demonstrated when the team ultimately breaks up
and each member performs solo. Powell was certainly the driving force of this particular team, though Pressburger was happy to have it that way, and his own contributions were not inconsiderable. And not insignificantly, most of the best Powell films can be found within his period of collaboration with Pressburger. By any standards, Powell was one of the liveliest and most inventive of all British directors, making remarkable strides through the 1930s with films like "Lazy Bones" and "The Phantom Light" to 1939's "The Spy in Black" and then on to "Contraband", "One Of Our Aircraft Is Missing", "The Thief of Bagdad" and "The Raw Shovel". Powell's few if any - directors have had their work as mutilated (or withheld) in the U.S. as Powell. The quite long "One Of Our Aircraft Is Missing" was substantially trimmed; his initial magnum-opus, "The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp", after initial rave reviews from the NY press was "trimmed" down from its three hour length to less than half; on tv, it can be seen in a middle-length version, but with its magnificent Technicolor reduced to black-and-white. "A Canterbury Tale", his most personal work, was virtually ignored by its distributors and became a forgotten film almost immediately (in England as well); "Black Narcissus" (in this country) was badly cut - mailed would be a better word - to obten Legion of Decency approval (not that there was anything indecent in its recital of the tribulations of a band of nuns); "Gone to Earth" was taken over by Selsnick, streamlined, partially re-shot, and released here as "The Wild Heart"; "The Elusive Pimpernel", full of pictorial razzle-dazzle designed to exploit color, was released here in b/w as "The Fighting Pimpernel"; "Peeping Tom" was caught in the collapse of its American distributor and can't be shown, though one bootlegged print surfaces occasionally; "They're a Weird Mob", made some 11 years ago, was in a British premiere when it was released and to top it all, the film had its two sub-plots deleted entirely when released here, losing some three reels, although the long version is available for tv, alongside the short one. Naturally, it is the edited one that is usually shown. Fortunately our print tonight is of the full version. The Powell/Pressburger films of the 40's, while serious and often of major artistic value, were, if not escapist films, films about escape. They seemed to have a deep-rooted reluctance to deal with themes of contemporary relevance, and at a time when a great deal of importance was going on, this tended to get them branded as dilettante film-makers, unable to face up to serious issues. That they loved film and frequently included sequences or shots just to show what the cinema could do, further removed them from consideration as major British film artists along with Reed and Lean. But in retrospect, their body of work - escape-oriented or not - is a commendable one. These themes of escape, or at least of withdrawal from the world around us, crop up in varying guises in "Stairway to Heaven", "The Red Shoes", "I Know Where I'm Going" (their loveliest and most lyrical film), "Black Narcissus" and even in tonight's film which, while its most serious, most realistic and in a sense most contemporary film, still retreats back into the war years to deal with problems that had become less significant in the post-war period. But despite its serious demeanour, those British critics who wanted to snipe were given ammunition by an absurdly surrealistic delirium sequence, clearly inspired by "The Lost Weekend". As a piece of film-making, it is one of the best Powell/Pressburger films: a realistic, moving, underplayed and often tremendously suspenseful dramatic thriller. (Many people by the way tend to confuse it with Robert Newton's "The Hidden Room", a straight suspense-thriller; the films have no connection or similarity at all). Though generally well received by British critics, it had virtually no British exhibition, with its length and lack of star value given as rather lame excuses for its not being booked by a major circuit. There was no London first-run at all, no circuit booking, and not even a 42nd St-type availability, since London has no catch-all area like that. I recall that it was several months after its premiere that it finally got into a theatre, and then a small one at a North London suburb, Golders Green. Subsequent showings were very infrequent, and like "Millions Like Us" it was subsequently cut quite extensively, and reissued (in the mid-1950's). In this country it opened at the 72nd St. Trans Lux, but in much edited form; the sub-plot involving Leslie Banks and the new gun disappeared entirely; indeed, Banks only had one scene - at the very end of the film - in the U.S. "Missing, along with other scenes, was most of the footage involving the personal problems of Mr. Carr's assistant. The cutting was smoothly done, but certainly destroyed the rhythm and reduced the impact of the whole film. Oddly enough, there were no censor-dictated cuts, though one or two lines and implications were quite strong by U.S. filmic standards of the early 50's. Acting is uniformly first-rate by an exceptionally well-chosen cast, including that veteran (and occasional director as well) Milton Rosmer, and a delightful comic cameo from Robert Morley.

William K. Everson