The New School Film Series 27: Program #8
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Tudor History: British and Hollywood Versions

English history has somehow never been brought to life on the screen as excitingly as American history — despite the fact that there’s a good deal more of it to choose from. One or two Kings were far-sighted enough to get themselves butchered, in which partly picturesque way to warrant an "X" rating, but on the whole, as in all other things, the British have often let their history with taste but a deplorable lack of showmanship. Most periods of British history, and especially the 16th and 17th centuries, the years covered in tonight’s program, seem to avoid the clear-cut issues that distinguish American history, and to be submerged instead in a morass of inter-royal relationships and court intrigues. Always, it seemed, there was a Rathbone or a Hardwicke plotting and counter-plotting, pitting one faction against another, embittering America only in an ability to set up little deals on the side and to carve out their own niches. Henry VlII stands out as the true star of the proceedings. Henry VIII ascends the throne at the end of "Tower of London" (shown second) and some time after another "End of the World" little fathers Henry VIII, who is shown on his death-bed at the beginning of "Tudor Rose" (shown first). However, England was in such a mess all through this period that our juxtaposition hardly matters. Certainly far worse crimes have been committed in the name of dramatic license, and the films do play rather better in this order.

Tudor Rose (U.S. title: "Nine Days a Queen") (Gainsborough, 1936) Written and directed by Robert Stevenson; screenplay by Miles Malleson; Camera, Mutz Greenbaum; Art Direction, Vetchinsky; Musical Direction, Louis Levy; edited by Terence Fisher; 8 reels


Britain in the ’30s turned out a steady stream of elaborate historical dramas and romances, few of which attained impressive commercial success. Utilising fairly big names, many borrowed from Hollywood or the Continent, and with similarly imported directorial and photographic talent (Victor Seastrom, Karl Grune, Franz Planer), they were often very handsome to look at and to listen to, but too many were dramatically dull, built around incidents in history that even the British had little interest in. The aim was obviously to repeat the incredible success of Korda’s "The Private Life of Henry the 8th", but only two came close to really pulling it off - Wilcox’s "Neil Gwyn", a delightfully bawdy romp, and Tudor Rose. "Tudor Rose" achieved the neat trick of producing somewhat more moro-philosophical, but "popularising it through its younger players - John Mills, Nova Pilbeam, Desmonde Trees - all of whom manage to bring surprising warmth, conviction and a sense of tragedy to their performances. Much was expected of the then 17-year old Nova Pilbeam, and she was an unconventional asset to a number of British films, but she never achieved the major stardom she seemed headed for. (She married Pen Tennyson, one of the more promising young British directors, who died tragically in the war after only three extremely good movies). Boy-King performances have seldom been very successful, as witness "Tower of London", but Desmonde Trees, usually brash and a trifle buffoonish, manages to recover the dignity that can descend upon a boy when he is suddenly thrust on to a throne. It is almost certainly his best performance. (Nobody who ever worked with him, actors, directors, cameramen and especially Francis L. Sullivan, ever had a good word to say for him, and there was a strong belief among Gainsborough personnel that Hitchcock had him blown up in that bus in "Sabotage" just to relieve his own personal antagonism.)

"Tudor Rose" is strikingly photographed, and the interior sets are most impressive. It lacks Hollywood expertise of course, and once in a while a too-obvious miniature or inexpert process shot intrudes, but such moments are rare. The deliberate skirting of spectacular scenes; the keeping of the battles off-screen in a way foreign since in this film of historical pageant - often more theatrical than cinematic is an example of it. Most important, it does create a real sense of time and place. One is convinced, by the sets and by the events, far more so, for example, than in Ford’s "Mary of Scotland". Occasionally, the dialogue suffers from a little inconsistency. Most of the characters stubbornly "talk Royal" all the way, with Mary Tudor in particular speaking as though every line were a last-act curtain. And writer Miles Malleson has made actor Malleson some amusing lines of domestic bickering which seem right out of a

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British family comedy of the '30's. But luckily, so many of the players - and Hardwicke particularly - are such fine actors of the old school that the occasionally stiff and stagey dialogue is very adroitly smoothed out. Pictorially, some of the little symbolisms - the chess-game in the foreground, the douning of the candles - seem rather obvious today, but they are not obtrusive. And for the rest, the studied groupings and excellently lit close-ups represent a first-class photographic job. All in all, while not a great film, "Tudor Rose" doesn't date, and is as good a film today as it was more than 40 years ago. It was only Robert Stevenson's fourth film as a director, and also represented Terence Fisher's first screen-credit as an editor, a field he would stay in for some twelve years before switching to directing and ultimately becoming the leading director of stylish Hammer horror films.

Ten Minute Intermission

"TOWER OF LONDON" (Universal, 1939) Produced and directed by Rowland V. Lee; Story and screenplay, Robert M. Lee; Camera, George Robinson; Music, Charles Previn; Frank Skinner; Art Director, Jack Otterson; 9 reels

Howland V. Lee seemed to inherit in the late 30's all of the colorful plums at Universal that should have gone to James Whale (then finishing at his contract on lesser films) and that in earlier years certainly would have. Lee's taste aims for hokum within hailing distance of Whale's, but he was a vigorous director and did share Whale's ability to make what he did look bigger and more expensive than it was. However, while Whale could get a little over-budget and came up with class results that justified it, Lee sometimes went quite substantially over-budget. He still got maximum values out of his budget, but never got that "class" look that was so characteristic of Whale. "Tower of London" is a comparatively cheap film, and the corner-cutting is there if you look for it, but there's usually more than enough going on to cover it up quite neatly.

Forget history. Even forget Ainsworth's novel of the same name. Remember instead that Lee, Rathbone and Karloff had earlier that year made "Son of Frankenstein". "Tower of London", for all its historic pretensions, is basically a Grand Guignol blood-bath, and had it been re-cast with Karloff as Richard III, Lugosi in the present Karloff role, and Rathbone in the Price role, it would have been a horror film. But simple. Even the musical score is largely a rehash of the "Son of Frankenstein" score, with the monster theme being repeated for Karloff. As such, it is all marvellous fun. Rathbone plays intelligently and has some excellent lines, but his modus operandi includes a little trick repeated from "The Invisible Ray", and even he can't persuade one to take any of it seriously in the face of the magnificent torture-chamber scene early in the film. Here, axe-man Karloff, black raven perched on his shoulder, drags his club-footed bulk on a tour of inspection of the torture devices, casually adding a weight here and tormenting a starving wretch there, before happily going off to lop off another head. The multitudinous murders and assassinations and even Richard's ultimate end are all handled in the full-blooded, no-nonsense manner of a Karloff-Lugosi chiller. Historically, "Tower of London" is not so much distorted as woefully simplified. The complicated problems of illegitimacy are referred so ever so delicately. The all-important Lord Buckingham isn't there at all. Time is compressed or expanded to suit the script, and everybody drops royal names like mad. The battles are cunningly done - cheaply and impressively - on the back-lot - with mist and rain concealing the studio environs, and rather adding hiding the lack of extras. The economy also extended - perhaps over-extended - should be the word - to the helmets and armor, initially made of cardboard. But they quickly got soggy and fell apart as the rain machines got to them, and much of this battle had to be reshoot with sturdier weapons and apparel. Lurid and anarchistic it may be, but it's at least exhilaratingly different and lively history. (In Englini, schoolteachers quite in vain, urged their pupils not to see it!) And some of it, and particularly the two jousting sequences, is really good. By any standards, it is many notches above the "remake" done in the early 60's with this version's Duke of Clarence - Vincent Price - promoted to the Richard role.

--- WM. K. EVerson ---