CARDINAL RICHELIEU (20th Century-United Artists, 1935) Directed by Rowland V. Lee
Produced by William Goetz and Raymond Griffith; Screenplay by Haude Howell, Cameron Rogers and W.F. Lipscomb, from the play by Edward Bulwer-Lytton; Camera, Peverell Marley; Music, Alfred Newman; 9 reels

Arliss' last Hollywood film, "Cardinal Richelieu" is also one of the very few not tailored specifically to him, even though it is obviously an ideal vehicle for him and based on a play which, in its day, was purely a vehicle for major theatrical stars. Yet unlike "Disraeli", "Alexander Hamilton" and so many of the others - even "Old English", surely the definitive Arliss vehicle - it has such a good story on its own, that it entertains on several levels - as dramatic history, as low-key romantic swashbuckling, and of course as an example of the typical, lush production standards of the day.

Arliss has a marvellously theatrical entrance - actually a double entrance - and makes the most of all of his unique lines and speeches, even if, by the sheer force of personality and acting humor, he loses some of the tyrannical character into the standard lovable Arliss image. If Richelieu really operated on this level, suggesting a collaboration between Dr. Mabuse and the KGB, he must have been much more of a wheeler-dealer than the saintly performances by Niel de Brueiller through the years have tended to suggest. It does seem a little unlikely that his manipulations would have extended to financing Scottish rebellions against the British, since the Scotch never seemed to want either the money or the encouragement for such enterprises. It's a delight to watch the padding and trimming, in large parts and small, and to enjoy the youthful charm of Maureen O'Sullivan once more. Only Edward Arnold seems a little out of place, flinging out such lines as "He'll have me excommunicated before he's through!" as though he were still playing a shady New York lawyer facing disbarment. Glossy and handsome though it is, the film does lack a distinctive directorial or pictorial style - a common failing with director Rowland V. Lee. Some of the low-key situations of "The Iron Mask" of 1929, and Whale's 1939 remake were both more interesting in terms of pictorial composition and art direction, but then they didn't have George Arliss to dominate the screen either! Arliss' trio of films for 20th Century (the others: "The Last Gentleman and the House of Rothschild", both of which we've played earlier) did seem to give him a shade less control than his Warner series. They were more opulent, less theatrical, and handled by directors who had enough backbone not to be totally under Arliss's thumb. Nevertheless, the cast alone - full of Arliss' old stage and screen cronies - indicates that he got what he wanted much of the time!

Ten Minute Intermission

THAT CERTAIN AGE (Universal, 1938) Directed by Edward Ludwig; Produced by Joe Pasternak; Screenplay by Bruce Manning from a story by F. Hugh Herbert; Camera, Joseph Valentine; Musical Director, Charles Prevlin; Songs, Jimmy McHugh, Harold Adamson; 6 reels

Deanna Durbin and George Arliss have made a felicitous and civilised combination to launch our series before, but sad to relate we're approaching the end of the possibilities of such future combinations. We've deliberately held off playing "That Certain Age" until now as it is the least of her initial ten films with Joe Pasternak ("Three Smart Girls"-"It Started With Eve", 1935-41) - but on the other hand, it is the only one left of that vintage group, is certainly very enjoyable, and does rate a showing.

At the time of course it was a huge hit. Deanna's fourth feature, it succeeded not only on the momentum of the previous three, but also on its own merits. Reviews stressed that it was different from the earlier ones, but they didn't make very much of the differences, and certainly didn't imply that it was a mistake to try to be different. Only in retrospect, with the entire body of Durbin work in mind, can one see that with this film, the formula faltered momentarily. Universal seemed to realise it though, even if the boxoffice didn't, and got back to the basic Durbin ingredients with the follow-up films. This shouldn't be taken as a blanket endorsement of "formula" pictures, but in the case of "That Certain Age", it wasn't so much a matter of deviating from
the formula, as it was of taking that formula for granted, assuming that the film couldn't miss, and not giving it those extra touches and signs of care which distinguished the previous three and the later six in the Fasternak group.

Deanna's character this time is wrapped up in her own fairly minor problems, and given the luxury of her surroundings and life-style, they seem trivial indeed, and lose her much of that automatic sympathy that her screen character usually generated. The adults are there and the generation gap is well represented, but there's little substance to the relationships. Nor does Jackie Cooper's petulance help the juvenile side very much. The film is too long for its slight story, which means that the gaps between songs are too long and some sequences just seem extraneous. The whole opening episode with the Boy Scouts, although it provides nominal plot motivation, really has little to do with the film, and seems thrown in (a) to ensure cooperation with and advertising tie-ups from the Boy Scout movement, and (b) to use up all those uniforms that Universal still had on hand from the Jackie Cooper serial "Scouts to the Rescue!" But basically, it all boils down to the wrong choice of director. Edward Ludwig was an off-beat and certainly interesting director, but one with a special talent for melodrama, horror and war films. His movies ranged from "The Man Who Reclaimed His Head" to "The Fighting Seabees" and "The Wake of the Red Witch"; the best of his few comedies was "Adventure in Manhattan," a decidedly "black" murder-mystery comedy. The one quality he didn't possess was the ability to wrest charm and warmth from fairly cliched situations. Even given the script of "That Certain Age" as it stands, Henry Koster (ideally) or William Seiter would have invested it with humanity, ripped footage out of dullest sections, and built up the ones with more potential. Deanna's visit to the jeweler (nicely played by Grant Mitchell) is one of the highlights of the film merely because it is one of the few sequences with any warmth at all; yet there is still a mechanical quality to it, and it lacks the kind of beauty that Koster would have created with it. Even the photography has a flatter, less luminous look than usual, and there's a lack-lustre quality to the performing too, which confirms how much even seasoned trouper relied on the right direction. Melvyn Douglas went through this kind of role so many times he could do it in his sleep, and he almost seems to do it at times. With Durbin's youthful vivacity and her glorious voice, she could never be less than a delight - but it's her quietest and least joyous performance.

It looks as though Ludwig was determined to get away from sentimentality and substitute sophistication in this one.

Admittedly, these flaws seem far more apparent today and it is perhaps unfair to stress them so much. They undoubtedly seem so obvious because the film is so close in spirit (though superior to) all those wartime Donald O'Connor-Susan Foster-Gloria Jean programmers that Universal made, and that were formula pictures, each indistinguishable from the other -- a criticism that could never be made of the Durbins.

This lengthy citation of the film's shortcomings is mainly for the benefit of those who may be discovering Durbin for the first time -- and oddly enough, there are a few such people in the world. It would be a pity if they were to assume this to be a "definitive" Durbin, and if there are any first-timers in the audience tonight, they are advised to seek out "Mad About Music" and "Three Smart Girls" and especially "First Love" as being far more typical of the exuberance and sheer joy of the best Durbin films. For the rest, "That Certain Age" needs no apology. Deanna is charming, the film is slick and professional. But we all know that both she, and Universal, could do a great deal better.

Incidentally, somewhere along the line a set of printed credits referred to the film as having a script by Brackett and Wilder. The information was accepted as valid and reprinted. I was guilty of assuming it to be true too, and have referred to the film a couple of times as having been written by them. On double-checking every possible source -- since their names do not appear in the credits -- it is now apparent however that they had no connection with the film at all, and one can only assume that the initial mistake came about through someone confusing this film with the 1939 "What a Life," also with Jackie Cooper which they did write.

William K. Everson

For your information: Program ends tonight at approx. 11:15.

Due to the length of the program, there will be no post-screening discussion this week.

Next week's program: King Vidor's gentle and rarely shown "The Stranger's Return" (1933) with Lionel Barrymore, Miriam Hopkins and Franchot Tone, preceded by "Change of Heart" (1934) with Janet Gaynor, Charles Farrell, Ginger Rogers and Shirley Temple.

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