Two British ghost stories

During World War Two, with death brought more frequently — and closer — to home, the ghost story began to be taken more seriously on the screen, and not merely relegated to horror films or those adapted from literary romanticism. In the U.S. the ghost tale was used less as a romantic fantasy and more as a means of reflecting a nation's reality. It played up to be more philosophical. Neither of tonight's films are intended as out-and-out thrillers, as was Hollywood's "The Uninvited", still one of the best of its breed. Although, they should, they have their suspenseful and uneasy moments, they aim at being satisfying and thoughtful rather than chilling.

HALFWAY HOUSE (Ealing Studios, 1945) Directed by Basil Dearden; Produced by Michael Balcon and Cavalcanti; screenplay by Angus McPhail and Diane Morgan, with additional scripting by T.E.B. Clarke and Roland Pertwee; Special Effects, Roy Kellicott; Camera, Wilkie Cooper; Music, Lord Berners; from the play "The Peaceful Inn" by Dennis Ogden; 75 minutes. With Pio Franqico Rosi, Remigio Coacci, Glynn Johns, Marvyn Johns, Alfred Drayton, Sally Ann Howes, Eamond Knight, Valerie White, Richard Bird, Guy Middleton, Pat McGrealh, Philippa Hiatt, C.W. France, Roland Pertwee, Elliot Makeham, John Boxxer, Rachel Thomas, Joss Ambler, Jack Jones, Moses Jones, Ralph Michael (radio voice) Basil Dearden and Cavalcanti, who later collaborated (with two of the same stars) on "Dead of Night", here offer a kind of dry run for that later classic ghost story. It's similar in construction and in its writing, but in essence is less of a thriller than a dramatic story that (as also did "Thunder Rock") uses its ghosts for philosophic rather than thrillers. The respect in which they were held, rather than the intense love and adoration, makes them more real, and used them as a means of taking stock and mused about the brave new world that was coming. "They Came to a City" and "The Lost People" were submerged by talk, but the two ghost stories of the group were rather more successful. It's as well that "Halfway House" has a dramatic substance, for its ghosts tip their hand rather obviously and with all the subtlety of Max Schreck in "Nosferatu". And even, allowing for the fact that the ghosts at Halfway House are British and thus with a reserve not easily ruffled by untoward circumstances, their casual acceptance of the spectres and their lack of curiosity concerning their failure to cast shadows, does seem to carry British restraint a little too far. However, one can't really ask for too much logic in a film dealing with both ghosts and a third dimension of time. A misfire film, and one not too well received either by the critics or the public, it is still an interesting work and incidentally, a complete print, some 20 minutes longer than the edited U.S. release version.

— Ten Minute Intermission —

A PLACE OF ONE'S OWN (Gainsborough, 1945; U.S. release by Eagle-Lion in 1949) Directed by Bernard Knowles; produced by R.J. Minney and Maurice Ostrer; Screenplay by Brook Williams from the novel by Osbert Sitwell; Camera, Stephen Dade; Music, Hubert Bath; 92 minutes. With James Mason, Margaret Lockwood, Barbara Mullen, Dennis Price, Helen Hayes, Dulcie Gray, Michael Shelley, Moore Marriott, O.B. Clarence, Helen Goss, Edie Martin, Gus McNaughton, John Turnbull, Clarence Wright, Ernest Thesiger. Coming mid-way between "Halfway House" and "Dead of Night", "A Place of One's Own" was well received by the British critics, but rejected at the boxoffice for reasons that had little to do with its quality. James Mason and Margaret Lockwood were tremendously popular British stars at that time, especially together as a dynamic (and sometimes masochistic) love team in films like "The Man in Grey". Casting them in a film like this (Mason as an old man, Lockwood romantically involved with him) might have been artistically sound, but commercially it was akin to taking Gable and Harlow right after "Red Dust" and putting them into "Pickwick Papers". (Not that Harlow wouldn't have made an interesting if off-beat Arabella) Over here, the film was delayed until well after release of "Dead of Night", and its gentile quality seemed doubly emphasized in comparison with that film, and reviews were lukewarm. However, as a stately British equivalent of the film, it probably filled its want well; while it doesn't exactly do it, it does make one feel uneasy as all good ghost stories should. It's exceptionally well acted and the sets and overall art-direction create the Victorian flavor rather well. It was the first film (and still one of the best) to be directed by Bernard Knowles, a former cameraman, and such an atmospheric tale was obviously a difficult assignment for a man who hadn't directed before. He does it with style and taste, but perhaps not with quite enough flair. However, it's a most satisfying film — not just for the dramatic appearance of Ernest Thesiger, like a refugee-wraith from a James Whale movie.

Program Ends: 11.23 approx.