
"A Jank at Oxford" was the first, the least pretentious, and possibly the most profitable of the big trio of co-productions (the others: "Goodbye Mr. Chips" and "The Citadel") that MGM launched in Britain in the late 30's, taking intelligent advantage of the revised British Quota laws which encouraged and made worthwhile the making of better quality American-financed British films, and reduced the quantity of lesser ones. MGM was off to an auspicious start, and although the war intervened and curtailed the program, MGM did continue to turn out interesting British films ("The Haunted Honeymoon") and never again reverted to such earlier-30's quickies as "Dr. Syn Fang". Surprisingly, the film was made with all the uncertainty and chaos surrounding such later American films as "Gone With the Wind" because the film was clearly designed to be popular boxoffice from first-to-last, and artistic sensibilities could not have been very profound. Presumably the ultra-efficient MGM in Hollywood had doubts about their British cousins being able to be equally efficient, so there were supervisors, executive producers and writers coming out of the woodwork, many of them totally unbillied on the film. This procedure bore fruit, for British British individualism, made like Balcon and Gilliatt, who both left the MGM British unit fairly quickly, but in all fairness the results don't show the lack of harmony. Undeniably formalised, it is nevertheless a model of how to make this kind of co-production, and despite the stock-piling of talents (and the probable wasting of them), individuality does shine through, and one has no trouble spotting the odd sequence, or line of dialogue, contributed by Gilliatt.

This film is a product of a course, and in it is a pronounced desire for similar-formula pictures, enhanced by the added possibilities of World War Two, in which Yanks found themselves at Lenton in the RAF in Australia, on the Burma Road, in Libya (thanks to PCG's stock footage) and other British outposts, plus which of course there were the more closely related derivations such as Laurel & Hardy's "A Chump of Oxford" and Robert Montgomery's "The Earl of Chicago". Many of the later ones became repetitive and tiresome, but this initial entry, if not markedly original, is pleasant, well-varied in content, full of marvellous names and faces, and is really carefully produced with some well-integrated U.S.-shot sequences. It's almost a definite Taylor role, and there's a particularly effective performance from Vivien Leigh - so good that one wishes there was substantially more of her. Friction between supervisors did not extend to Hollywood reliable, director Jack Conway, who got on well with his job in a precise-Gilliatt fashion and established good rapport with his British cast and co-workers. (Gilliatt speaks very fondly of him, and the tactful way he controlled Edward Higby's tendency to over-act!) All told, it's good to look at and listen to and a very satisfying film; qualities we once took for granted in film.

Program ends: 11.15

William K. Everson