Two Mid-30's Musicals

IT'S LOVE AGAIN (Gainsborough-British, 1936) Directed by Victor Saville
Screenplay by Marion Dix and Austin Melford from an original story by Marion Dix and Lester Samuels; Camera, Glen MacWilliams
Art Direction, Alfred Junge; Music and lyrics, Sam Coslow and Harry Von Tilzer; Music arranged by Jack Teagarden; 80 mins.


We've wanted to play this lively Jessie Matthews musical for a long while, but frankly the prints available have all been too bad - sometimes so dupey that the Matthews face was no more than a blurred white blob! Pictorial quality is particularly important in the Matthews films, not only for the pleasure of seeing that face and form in motion, but more essentially because the films need a constantly artificial quality to disguise the real film needs a้อม穆他ineering veneer of glossy sets and well-lit decor - just as the Astaire-Rogers musicals from this country need their glamorous trimmings to back up their dancing stars. Our print tonight is far from the pristine original print we'd like, but it is by far the best dupe copy of many that we screened, and quite acceptable. The film, notorious at the time for a dancing costume that caused quite as much of a furor as Jane Russell's 3-D dancing costume in "The French Line" (both of these cinematic scandals having now been quite forgotten in the light of later events, both hilariously far from being the last enjoyable Matthews film, but it was the last really good one - for the simple reason that it was her last under the helm of director Victor Saville. Saville, one of the best British directors of the 30's, and Matthews' most felicitous director, left Gaumont to join MGM and Korda. The subsequent Matthews films were directed by her contract director, Sonnie Hale, always more than a little on the stage under Hale's direction, and their whole deteriorating relationship somewhat paralleled the "A Star is Born" situation. 1936 was somewhat of a peak year for Matthews; it was the year in which Hollywood made its most determined efforts to acquire her (both MGM and RKO wanted her); it was also the year in which John Gleigaut came to add another star on the London stage in Rattigan's "French Without Tears". The backer's confidence in the play was shaky however, and it was ultimately not presented until somewhat later. "It's Love Again" is contrived froth, but it's the contrivance of the London musical theatre. Despite the stylistic parallels to the Astaire-Rogers films, and the American musical talent that was often injected into them, the Jessie Matthews musicals remain the only really successful British musicals, and the only ones to retain a British identity. (I am not overlooking the Gracie Fields films which were both successful and very definitely British, but were not, in essence, musicals).

- Ten Minute Intermission -

THANKS A MILLION (20th Century-Fox, 1935) Director, Roy Del Ruth
Screenplay co-written by Darryl F. Zanuck; Screenplay by Nunnally Johnson; Camera, Peverall Marley; Songs by Arthur Johnston and Gus Kahn; 80 mins.


Fox musicals of the 30's and 40's are, on the whole, an uninspiring group of films, their entertainment values limited largely to the star personalities involved - Faye, Crable, Henie primarily. Their plots were predictable and far more formalized than those of any other studio, and their comedy relief often quite feeble. "Thanks a Million" may seem partially so refreshing because it avoids most of the pitfalls of the mediocre Fox musicals that followed, though also it was initially planned for the 20th Century Company (releasing through UA before the merger) so in that sense it isn't a traditional Fox film. It has been somewhat overlooked in favor of "On the Avenue", which I always found an over-rated film and too patent and slick a copy of the Astaire-Rogers films. "Thanks a Million" lacks its gloss and has some rough edges, but on the whole is much superior to it. It too was perhaps over-rated by the critics in 1935, since political satire was an element then quite new to the musical. Today, in the era of Recht and MacArthur, and Preston Sturges, it seems less inclined to pull its political punches and to be amiable rather than pithy. However, it has hardly lost its topicality - New York had a Dick Powell-type mayor only a couple of seasons back, and undoubtedly still has its quota of Edwin Maxwells and Paul Harveys: A little slow in getting under way and by no means entirely free of boy-meat-and-josie-girl cliches, it's still pleasant, tuneful, full of interesting faces and varied musical talents, and most of all, a very rarely seen musical that certainly deserves to garner a little fresh attention today.

-- William K. Everson --