The British Love Story: Realism and Extravagance

BANK HOLIDAY (Gainsborough-General Film Distributors, 1937; rel: 1938)
Directed by Carol Reed; Screenplay by Rodney Ackland and Roger Burford from an original story by Ackland and Hans Wilhelm; Produced by Edward Black; Camera, Arthur Crabtree; Music, Louis Levy; Art Direction, Vetchinsky; Released in the U.S.A. as "Three Weeks A Weekender Without Margaret Lockwood (Cecil Range); Hugh Williams (Geoffrey); John Lodge (Steady); Rene Ray (Doreen); Linden Travers (Ann Howard); Merle Tottenham (Milly); Wally Patch (Arthur); Kathleen Harrison (Nay); Garry Marsh (Manager); Jeanie Stuart (Miss Mayfair); Wilfrid Lawless (Sergeant); Felix Aylmer (Surgeon); Alfred Goddard (man on beach); Michael Rennie (guardian).

"Bank Holiday" was Carol Reed's sixth picture, and while there had been some very good ones in the prior five (especially "Laburnum Grove"), this was the film that really called attention to him as one of the major new British directorial talents. "The Stars Look Down" followed about a year later, but that was a much more ambitious project. In the case of Margaret Lockwood, whose 16th film it was, it was also a star-making vehicle. She followed up with "The Lady Vanishes" for Alfred Hitchcock, followed by four consecutive films with Carol Reed.

It's an intelligent and unpretentious film, sensibly written and acted, and keeping its emotions well under control the whole time. Had it been made just a few years later (which would have been impossible, since the war made the big Bank Holiday seaside outings obsolete and impractical) it would have undoubtedly benefited from the new documentarian influx into British narrative film generally. As it is, there is relatively little location shooting, other than for establishing shots, and much of it does have a studio look to it - albeit a consistent and well-controlled studio look. It's not a particularly well known film, nor, on its own level, a classic — but it is well above the average standard of British films of its day, and an indication of the more honest and realistic direction in which British films were moving. Wondrous performances from Lodge and Mayfair and a later career as Governor of Connecticut somewhat obliterates his interesting work in both British and American films of the 30's; and the fact that cameraman of "Bank Holiday" Arthur Crabtree, made his directorial debut with our co-feature "Madonna of the Seven Moons".

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

MADONNA OF THE SEVEN MOONS (Gainsborough-Eagle Lion, 1944) Directed by Arthur Crabtree; Produced by R.J. Minney; Screenplay by Roland Pertwee and Brook William from the novel by Margery Lawrence; Music, Louis Levy; Camera, Jack Cox; Art Direction, Andrew Mazzel; released in the U.S. by Universal in 1946, out to 88 minutes; original length (tonight's print) 110 mins.

With: Phyllis Calvert (Maddalene/Rossana); Stewart Granger (Rino Baruccali); Patricia Roc (Angela); Peter Glenville (Sandro Baruccali); John Stuart (Cziazoldi); Jean Kent (Victoria); Nancy Price (Madame Baruccali); Peter Illing (Hill (Lagar)); Dulcie Gray (Nesta); Reginald Tate (Ackroyd); Amy Veness (Tessa); Hilda Haylay (Mrs Pinke) and Alan Haines, Helen Haye.

After a steady spate of contemporary (and therefore war-oriented) stories in the initial years of the war, Gainsborough gambled on a piece of sheer romantic escapism in 1943 with "The Man in Grey", with such staggering commercial success that a whole cycle followed, covering all the well known historical periods. Next to "The Man in Grey", "Madonna of the Seven Moons" was the most successful at the box office. It had added prestige by going out through Rank's new Eagle-Lion company, initially designed only for "classics" (a concept that soon fell flat), and by being so long (by the standards of the day) that on its initial release it was single-billed. (Wartime programs tended to try to run short, so that theaters could close early). "Madonna of the Seven Moons" is designed as an escapist costume romance, though actually, if one takes the trouble to investigate, it is set in exactly the same period as "Bank Holiday". All of it is presented as a kind of Never-Never-Land; only one establishing date is ever mentioned, and that so casually that amid the fast-moving farrago of rape, religion, assassins and crimes passionel, there isn't much incentive to work forward from that one date and figure out that all of this is taking place in immediate postwar Italy rather neatly - and ironically - in its very escape with its comparison of newspaper headlines. "Madonna of the Seven Moons" is both absurd and yet wonderfully overblown in its own way, given such pictorial gloss (by a director who was formerly a cameraman) and such totally artificial art direction that there's never any need to take it seriously. The acting is earnest but totally British, and it's hard indeed to accept most of the players as hot-blooded Italians. Calvert plays Rossana with such a frou-frou temperament and with the constant threat of being absurd to even call John Stuart "Guiseppe"! Peter Glenville (later a less good director than he was an actor) is however quite marvellous as the lecherous and quite degenerate villain, and Patricia Roc is as always a fresh and uncomplicated delight as his intended victim. The American release version was substantially (though intellgently) edited down by some 22 minutes, the casualties including much of Granger's Tragedy at "Rossana". The loss to British audiences is almost hardly warranted in a cultural tragedy, but it is good to have the full version - song and all - for this screening tonight.

Program Ends: 10:58 (No discussion period this evening) -- William K. Everson
Ps: Trivia note: Phyllis Calvert, playing Patricia Roc's mother in "Madonna,..." was actually less than three years older than Roc!