ARCHIVE NIGHT: TWO BRITISH MUSICALS

THE ONLY GIRL (Gaumont-British/UPA, 1933; US release 1934, as "Heart Song"); Directed by Friedrich Hollander; produced by Erich Pommer; screenplay by Walter Reisch and Robert Liebmann, from a novel by Felix Salten; English screenplay by Robert Stevenson and John Hoyt; Camera, F. Behr-Graud; Music adapted from operettas by Jacques Offenbach, Charles Lecocq and Léo Delibes; music arranged by Andran; music adapted by Friedrich Hollander and Franz Waxman; 80 mins.; With: Lilian Harvey, Character Boyer, Mady Christians, Maurice Evans, Friedel Schuster, Julius Falkenstein, Ernest Thesiger, Huntley Wright, Reginald Smith, Ruth Maitland, O.B. Clarence.

Normally our "Archive Night" showings are the last in each series; we've had to make an exception this time only because the print of "The Only Girl" is due back in England at the end of the month. An archival framework seems the best and most honest way to show it; obviously this kind of film, and with this Archive Night especially - raises all kinds of expectations. Unfortunately they're not quite fulfilled. It's a misfire film, but a fascinating one - not only for itself, but for its place at a critical juncture in German film. For a number of reasons, it's well worth showing - but the Archive setting will, we hope, be a tip-off that it's perhaps more interesting academically than as a wholly successful entertainment.

It's one of half-a-dozen musical comedies and operettas that were made as German/French/English co-productions in the early 30's, with an occasional non-musical ("The Tunnel") given the same treatment. "Sunshine Susie" was about the best of the group, although "Congress Dances" and "The Blonde Dream" are probably better-known. The German version of "The Only Girl" was titled "Tot Und Die Kaiserin"; the French "Nou et l'Imperatrice". Lilian Harvey and Julius Falkenstein were in all three, while Conrad Veidt took over from Boyer in the German version; the Maurice Evans role was played by Heinz Ruhmann in the German version and by Pierre Brasseur in the French.

It was - perhaps fortunately - the only film ever directed by Friedrich Hollander, much better known for his songs - and especially as a composer for Dietrich, ranging from "The Blue Angel" to "Seeverd Schmuck". While he may have been more confident in the German version, his handling of the British material is very strange. Although all the ingredients are there - literally all, since the film seems to echo and foreshadow "Love Me Tonight", "Congress Dances", "The Love Parade" and "A Night at the Opera", with a little "Cinderella" thrown in - they never seem to jell. Charles Boyer's and especially Maurice Evans display tremendous charm, but their best scenes are snatched away from them just as their momentum gets going; and all the music is curiously un-exploited. There are some incredible technical gaffes, especially in the early riding scenes; an obvious cyclorama on which even more obvious shadows can be seen, and an incredibly exposed shadow of the entire camera crew. Remembering how well "Sunshine Susie" turned out, one must assume that the fault lay not with the co-production formula and logistics, but with Hollander himself. The are plenty of other examples of a director making only one single film and doing less well than Hollander here; but with this cast and ingredients, one expects so much in terms of grace, elegance and charm, and the film doesn't deliver.... although, expecting little, you may be pleasantly surprised at that.

Everybody in the film sings, even including Ernest Thesiger, and there's a particularly charming performance from Mady Christians. Despite an interesting Hollywood career, she is undoubtedly best remembered for being the first stage Mama in the 1944 "I Remember Mama". It's a good-looking film, and the hunting forest has much the look of Lang's forest for "Giegfried". As in "Congress Dances" though, to a much lesser degree there are notes of grimness and near-sadism which perhaps give some unexpected bite, but also tend to detract from the charm a little.

The film is virtually unknown in Germany. It opened on February 22, 1933 in Berlin, just days before the Reichstag Fire. Almost immediately, the Nazis took over and the film was one of the first to be seized and suppressed, principally because so many Jews had worked on it: Pommer, Hollander, lyricist Robert Gilbert, Waxman, Felix Salten, Reisch, Liebmann, Conrad Veidt (an anti-Nazi, and married to a Jew), Mady Christians, Paul Morgan and Offenbach. Almost all would leave Germany. Lilian Harvey was in Hollywood at the time, but returned to Germany and remained a tremendously popular star. (For a full rundown on her career, I can recommend the October 1970 issue of "Films in Review", containing a very thorough article by Alfonso Pinto. Oddly enough, it says relatively little about this film, but does list all her films from 1925-40, and covers her stage work (to 1967) and her death in 1968).

Historian Richard Brauner, to whom I am indebted for some of the information in these notes, makes this comment about some of the musical elements: "There are two (ostensibly) Command Performances at the Empress Eugenie's palace, both Offenbach operettas. The first starts with the overture to "La Belle Helene", which segues into the salon from "Orpheus in the Underworld", and in the wings can

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be seen Mercury and other costumed dictions from "Orpheus", but there are no stage scenes alas. The other performance is, of course, "The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein", showing an amiable hodge-podge of two big scenes with the heroine (Friedel Schuster, a big Nazi favorite) and chorus."

— Ten Minute Intermission —

SHIPEARL SALLY (20th Century-Fox/British, 1939) Directed by Monty Banks
Screenplay by Karl Tunberg and Don Ettlinger; Camera, Otto Kanturek;
Produced by Robert Kane; Musical Direction, Louis Levy. 88 mins.
With Gracie Fields, Sydney Howard, Morton Selten, Norma Varden, Oliver Wakefield, Tucker McGuire, MacDonald Parke, Richard Cooper, Hay Petrie, Monty Banks.
"Shipearl Sally" was the last and best of Gracie Fields' three British films for 20th Century Fox, and in fact was her last British film altogether, although a short but interesting Hollywood career remained, for certainly's director and husband, Monty Banks, as usual gives himself a good bit — as the French doctor.

There are some interesting reflections on the pre-war British scenario footage of the launching of the Queen Mary, an exciting and well-remembered event; typically coarse stereotypes of show-business Americans (these were to disappear, though not totally, when America became a wartime ally); comic put-downs of Communism; inevitable comments on class distinction; and a very light-hearted attitude towards Air Raid Precautions, which nobody took very seriously. However, even during the film's production and its release, war became a certainty, and the patriotic finale was a good morale-booster.

"Shipearl Sally" was released over here as were all of the Fox British films, made on a fairly elaborate scale by the Robert Kane unit — but it wasn't pushed very hard, and in New York opened to very good reviews on the top half of a double bill (with "The Llano Kid") at the Central Theater. It's one British film of the purely escapist type that seems both funnier and more entertaining musically today than it did then — quite a rarity that, as this type of British film normally tends to date very quickly.

Program ends: 10:30 p.m.

Personal note: normally I am away for most of the Summer series, but this year have been on hand for most of the series. However, I'll be away for the last two programs, which will thus start promptly at 7:30 without introductions (but with of course the usual notes). The final program (August 1) will list the Fall schedule. If you're not on hand for that program, drop me a postcard c/o the New School and I'll mail you a copy, although it won't be until my return on Sept. 8. The Fall series begins on Sept. 28. Wks.

POST SCRIPT: The screenplay credit on SHIPEARL SALLY to Hollywood writers Karl Tunberg and Don Ettlinger is probably a contractual matter. They may have contributed the original idea, or worked on some form of the screenplay, but it is all too essentially British to be really their work. The British prints only carried the original but all-important credit Story by Gracie Fields, Tom Geraghty and Val Valentine.