Alastair Sim, who died two years ago in his late 70's, contributed a remarkable series of performances to British films between 1935 and 1975 - and of course was an equally distinguished stage actor as well. (In fact, in those periods when he seemed to have vanished from film, it was usually because of a return to the stage). Starting out with small parts and comic supports, including zany villains, he became a popular and important character actor at the end of the the 30's, attaining stardom in the mid-40's, and achieving real stature and prestige in the 50's. Despite the marvellous flexibility and subtlety of that seemingly elastic face, which made him much in demand for comedy, he was a superb straightforward dramatic actor too. We had intended to preface this two-film tribute with one or two excerpts from his earlier films, but somehow, at the last minute, it seemed inadequate to try to cover his tremendous progress over a 40-year film career with just two or three clips. Since there are other Sim features that we plan to show, I decided instead to do a very thorough survey of his career, from his first movie ("Riverside Murder") on, and make such a compilation literally half of an upcoming program. So today's program, one serious film and one comic, should be regarded only as part one of our Sim tribute, which we'll reserve in the Spring. Hopefully, Sim may become as much a part of future New School programs as George Arliss has in the past.

AN INSPECTOR CALLS (London Films-British Lion, 1954) Directed by Guy Hamilton
Produced by A.D. Peters; Screenplay by Desmond Davis from the play by J.B. Priestley; Camera, Ted Scaife; Music, Francis Chagrin; 80 mins.
With Alastair Sim (Inspector Goole); Arthur Young (Arthur Birling); Olga Lindo (Sybil Birling); Eileen Moore (Sheila Birling); Bryan Forbes (Eric Birling); Brian Worth (Gerald Croft); Jane Wenham (Eva Smith); Pat Neal, Amy Smith (Saida); Catherine Wilmer (Phil); Florence Walthall (Nora); Woodbridge (fish shop proprietor); Barbara Everest (Committee member); Charles Saynor (Police officer); John Welsh (shop walker); Frances Gowens (small girl); George Cole (bus conductor).

If not a major boxoffice name, J.B.Priestley has been a familiar and well-liked figure in British literary and theatrical circles for years. He worked on film scripts in the early 30's, was a prolific novelist, playwright, political and philosophical commentator, lecturer and radio and TV personality. Most of his works, ranging from straight comedies like "When We Are Married" to social provings such as "They Came to a City", have been filmed, though almost exclusively in England. Hollywood paid attention to Priestley only twice, in the very early thirties, with "The Old Dark House" and "Dangerous Corner". He was a good theatrical showman, often quite witty, and had the happy knack of making his not-very-intellectual thinking seem quite profound, thus flattering the egoes of the mass audience.

"An Inspector Calls" is neither a major nor a minor Priestley play, but a very typical one. It probably works better as a film since, without any real attempt at "opening it up" or minimizing its concentration on talk, the few exteriors - streets, a bus, shops, a bar - do manage to exploit the pre-War World One milieu very well, and make it unbtrusively richer, visually. It also offers some extremely good ensemble acting, with the two younger women - Jane Wenham and Eileen Moore - coming off exceptionally well. Sim's role is pivotal, but not very demanding, and he doesn't try to build it into more than it is. It's a pleasure to watch his confident grace still rivetting attention to him, even though all the other players get the share of the emotional outbursts and "big" scenes that, by the nature of the play, are denied to him. Its surprise ending is really no surprise at all, and there are constant clues - musically, especially - but it hardly seems to matter since it is a typical Priestley gambit play in which what happens is far less important than how it happens, and especially how it is told in terms of good dialogue and good acting.

-- 10 Minute Intermission --

THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE (British Lion, Individual Pictures, 1950)
Directed by Frank Launder; a Frank Launder-Sidney Gilliat Production; Screenplay by Launder and John Bighton based on the play by Bighton; Camera, Stanaway; Mischka Spolianzky; Title backgrounds, Ronald Searle; location director, George More O'Ferrall; 85 mins.
With Alastair Sim (Wetherby Pond); Margaret Rutherford (Miss Whitchurch); Joyce Grenfell (Miss Gossage); Bernadette O'Farrell (Miss Harper); Gladys Henson (Mrs Hampstead); John Turnbull (Matheas); John Bentley (Richard Tassell); Richard Wattis (Arnold Billings); Guy Middleton (Victor Hyde-Brown); Percy Walsh (Monseur Jove); Arthur Howard (Anthony Ramsay); Ruby Reihbow; Kenneth More (Max); Joan Woollard (Miss Jea); Stringer Davis (Rev.Rich); Pat Owens (Angela); George Cole (Flash Harry); and Myrtey Morven, Laurence Nalsmith, Patience Renoultt, Olwen Brookes, Nan Munroe, Russell Waters, Stanley Lemin.
The British, as a whole, are an inordinately dull race; moreover they recognise it, enjoy it, and would not have it otherwise. As a Britisher myself, I think I can make that statement without bringing on charges of a kind of introverted racism. However, among compensatory admirable qualities, the British do have a sense of humor, as indeed they need to have to survive in a country that is always behind the times and constantly beset by crises and aired in bureaucratic red tape. British comic "types", in both plays and film, seem to be neatly divided and to reflect the two "types" into which the British as a whole are divided - the smug, mildly pompous and totally self-absorbed individuals so beautifully played (one cannot even say caricatured) by Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne in "The Lady Vanishes" and "Night Train to Munich". At the other end of the scale are the comic eccentrics - the Alastair Sim and the Margaret Rutherfords - who represent those select few British to whom a retreat (or advance) into eccentricity is the only solution, and indeed the only alternative to a life of compliant normalcy. Most of the great Britshers have been eccentrics - from King Alfred and Lord Wellington on to Winston Churchill, who of course was a kind of blood-brother to Robert Morley.

"The Happiest Days of Your Life" celebrates these two dominating characteristics in the British character, with a marvellous parade of eccentrics (Sim, Rutherford, Grenfell) and an equally impressive if less endearing collection of clods - John Turnbull, Richard Wattis, Arthur Howard. What a pity that Robert Morley and Wilfrid Hyde-White could not have been roped in too to make this the definitive comment on the British, something to be deposited in a time capsule along with Noel Coward's "Cavalcade" (singularly shy on eccentrics, alas) to delight and confuse future generations.

Moreover, despite its farcical nature, "The Happiest Days of Your Life" is almost documentarian in its comments on British governmental bureaucracy, and the futility of trying to win against such a system. The only solution, as the protagonists find, is escape to the colonies - which is undoubtedly why I am film series at the New School rather than at Eton.

The film is based on a play which starred Margaret Rutherford, with George Howe in the Sim role. The screen teaming of Sim and Rutherford is a matinée to rank with Anthony and Cleopatra and Laurel and Hardy; sheer inspiration. Both underplay (and very occasionally, mug their underplaying, a unique and delicate art) and provide a superb text-book illustration of facial pantomime, and how to get the very most out of every single line. In comic terms, it is surpassed by Sim only in "Folly To Be Wise" - a play (and film) that was written for him by James Bridie (and that we plan to run very soon). It represents Sim's personal comic zenith - although the material is thinner and less amusing in itself than "The Happiest Days of Your Life". True, the inspiration does wear a little thin towards the end. Repetition sets in, and there's a mild kind of desperation in both the musical scoring, and the increasingly frenetic editing, to keep up the lunatic pace. Frank Launder, an efficient but never inspired director, might have benefitted from some writing collaboration from his production partner Sidney Gilliat - who however was, at that time, tied up with the shooting of "State Secret". However, it's totally unfair to quibble about minor shortcomings in any film that is such a joy in its dialogue and in its playing.

The film was made at the small Riverside Studios in Hammersmith in West London - a studio not large enough to accommodate more than one production at a time. It is to this that Launder attributes much of the success of the film: the unit becoming a kind of family, living and working together, the studio itself devoted to the one film and no other. Location work was done at a girls' school in Hampshire. The success of the film led, of course, to the whole series of "St. Trinian's" farces - which were popular enough, but obvious and heavy-handed, eluding the savage charm of Ronald Searle's cartoon originals, and deteriorating in quality - and inspiration - from picture to picture.

(Since I am away this week, questions about the films, about Sim etc., will have to be fielded until next week's (totally unrelated) program).

William K. Everson

Program Ends: Approx. 10.00 p.m.