Hollywood on England: two light entertainments

THE MIDNIGHT CLUB (Paramount, 1933) Director Hall; Assistant Director, George Somes; Screenplay by Seton I. Miller and Leslie Charteris from an original story by E. Phillips Oppenheim; Camera, Edward L. Cline; Music, Alfred Newman; 74 mins. With Olave Brook, George Raft, Helen Vinson, Alison Skipworth, Sir Guy Standing, Alfred Lunt, Ferdinand Gottschalk, Ethel Griffies, Forrester Harvey, Billy Bevan, Charles MacNaughton, Paul Ferry, Celeste Ford, Charles Coleman, Rita Carlyle, Pat Somerset, Jean de Bricas, Leo White, Tora Shihada.

Both of tonight's films are Hollywood adaptations of British novels with British locales; "Piccadilly Jim" is the most convincing milieu, though it is also far less sprightly -- which perhaps in itself underlines its on-target accuracy. At a rough (and unresearched) guess, I would estimate that the novels of E. Phillips Oppenheim have provided more fodder for British and American movies than those of any other mystery writer. Edgar Wallace a spectacular exception of course. Actually Oppenheim billed himself as a "story-teller" rather than a mystery writer, but there was an element of crime in most of his stories, and some of the best -- particularly the British Strange Boarders -- were real mysteries. He had a fondness for the dual role play (the three-times-filmed "The Great Impersonation" had such a gimmick) and here there are no less than three sets of doublets. To say too much about it would be to destroy its element of surprise. Suffice it to say that it is to be enjoyed rather than analyzed; it zips along to a total length of a "B" western, but is full of surprises and enjoyable performances, though it's hard to accept its London background, Sir Guy notwithstanding. Some of it is very pre-Cod, and you'll need to stay alert as the best single line of dialogue is rendered off-screen. Surprisingly though, the ending -- which offers a perfect trick solution -- seems to be tailored to the incoming Production Code, although the whole film is too much of a trifle for it to be considered a sellout.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --


Wodehouse's forte was light sophistication, and MGM certainly come up with a film in that mood. If Robert Montgomery isn't exactly the ideal Wodehouse hero, he certainly comes close, and works awfully hard (without it showing) to get into the right spirit. Robert Z. Leonard, however, is far from being the right director for this kind of froth. It actually plays rather like an Astaire-Rogers film without the music. And its slim plot of misunderstandings would seem to be a perfect peg on which to hang Astaire-Rogers songs, dances and repartee. It's an entertaining comedy, typically glossy and laden with reliable MGM names. But like so many MGM films of its period, it's over-produced. Although it is not excessively long, it seems longer than it is merely because of MGM's tendency to over-produce and to stretch one scene into two or three instead of disposing of it which its value is done. There's a certain heaviness in some of the writing too; it's amusing to have everybody sailing on a ship called The Monomania, but it's less amusing when MGM worry that some people won't get it the first time, and so pointedly repeat it. However, it's light-hearted, cheerful and pleasantly done. And quite apart from the stellar cast, there's Nage Evans, as cool, graceful and delightful as ever, so that one hardly needs to find excuses for the film. Moreover, presumably due to some legal contrestemps with the Wodehouse estate, it never seems to crop up these days, even on television. Best of all, it's a relaxed film, without that sense of aggression and desperation that seems to creep into so many contemporary comedies such as "Just Tell Me What You Want" -- a film that is rough physically, orally and in other ways too. It's the very lack of aggressiveness and hard-sell humor that gives "Piccadilly Jim" its charm.

-- Wm.K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.25, and will be followed by a discussion session.

Note: I was in error in stating that LE DIABLE AU CORPS (our March 14th program) was only released here in a dubbed version. It was released with subtitles, and we have found a titled print which we expect to show if the print itself is in good shape. (If not, the dubbed version is still excellent).

We'll confirm which it is to be on the prior two sets of notes. In the meantime, a reminder of next week's very special event, a fine and fully complete print of the film always considered to be Elisabeth Bergner's best, "Escape Me Never".