THE NEW SCHOOL  FILM SERIES 36: Program #2  February 15 1980

CHAMPAGNE WALTZ (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Edward Sutherland; produced by Harlan Thompson; Screenplay by Don Hartman and Frank Butler from an original story by Billy Wilder and H.S. Kraft; Camera, William Mellor; Dances staged by LeRoy Prinz; Music by Johann Strauss, Sam Coslow, Burton Lane, Lee Robin, Frederick Hollander; 85 mins.


"Champagne Waltz", which occasionally (but not often enough) lives up to the froth and elegance of its well-designed sequence, is one of the oddest films to emerge from Paramount in the mid-30's. Though the plot is hardly shrouded in mystery, Eddie Sutherland, who directed, was a former actor (and a very handsome one), silent director, erstwhile husband of Louise Brooks, and at this stage in his career a useful director of not terribly important "A" movies. (In the mid-30's, he was turning out about one film a year; this one was sandwiched in between 1936's "Poppy" with W.C. Fields and 1938's "Every Day's a Holiday" with Mae West. After 1940, at Universal, he became more prolific - but on relatively minor films). "Champagne Waltz" started out as a typical middle-of-the-road "A", probably quite slick and unpretentious. Paramount however, delighted with the rushes, decided to turn the film into a special, poured another $40,000 into it (a lot in 1936, when the film was in production) and unfortunately threw it entirely off-balance. Not only can one see where the grafting operations took place, but the big new scenes failed to give the film a sense of its own life; it suffers in the same change, and a lot of the film can't match it, nor is it fair to expect it to. The new aise invites one to take the film seriously - and the stereotyped plot-line, perfectly acceptable in a fast-moving "little" film, becomes tiresome in the revamped version. Moreover, characters have a way of disappearing for long stretches at a time. In fairness though, one tends to remember the film favorably: my own collection of it was only of its elegance and charm, not of its trite plotting and indeterminate sense of period. It's interesting too as an example of early Billy Wilder, and in a very loose sense might be considered something of a forerunner to his own later "The Emperor Waltz".

Another element of mystery, though not attached to just this film, is of Paramount's peculiar mishandling of Gladys Swarthout, an opera singer who failed to duplicate the filmic success of Grace Moore almost entirely due to Paramount's ineptitude in finding good vehicles for her. She had an excellent singing voice, beauty, and a graceful naturalness. Moreover, she was a surprisingly good actress. But between 1936 and 1939, Paramount put her into only a handful of pictures, the last of which - "Ambush" - was a good actioner with no music at all. "Champagne Waltz" comes half-way in her career, and is the closest thing to a good vehicle. A part of the reason for the revamping process, she wasn't given more music - for her song interludes are certainly the highlights of the film (with dear old Herman Bing coming in a close second!)

Curiously enough, the rental print supplied on this film was totally cut of sequence. Presumably it played on tv that way, and must have made no sense at all! We've restored it to its proper sequence, but the print itself is not in exactly A-1 condition, so it will need patience from you on two counts: for its own shortcomings, and for the infirmities of its physical condition. Even though hardly an unqualified success, it's still the kind of oddity that is worth reviving at least once.

ESCAPE ME NEVER (British & Dominion Films/United Artists, 1935) Directed by Paul Czinner; Produced by Herbert Wilcox; Screenplay by Carl Zuckmeyer and R.J. Oulier, from the original story by Margaret Kennedy; Camera, Georges Perinal and Sepp Allgayer; edited by David Lean; 95 minutes.

With Elisabeth Bergner, Hugh Sinclair, Griffith Jones, Fenelone Dudley Ward, Irene Vanbrugh, Leon Quartermaine, Lyn Harding, Rosalinda Fuller, Allan Jayes.

Few films can have received such unqualified raves as "Escape Me Never" got from The New York Times when it opened at the Radio City Music Hall in 1935. To a degree, it was understandable. Miss Bergner was then riding the crest of a critical acclaim that amounted to idolatry, having starred in the stage version in both London and on Broadway. Not only was the film very literate and exceedingly handsomely mounted, especially for a British film of the period, but its extensive use of European locations and picturesque mountain -over-
landscapes meant that its novelettish story, which must have lurched about somewhat on stage, controlled only by the persona of its star, was far smoother and flexible in its narrative flow. However, the NY Times was nothing if not double. When it reviewed the awful Warners remake of the 40's (with Ida Lupino, Errol Flynn, Eleanor Parker and Gig Young under the inept and inexperienced direction of Peter Godfrey) it implied that the original was no great shakes and "a little film" (which it certainly was not) and that its basic values were simplicity and the Bergner performance.

"Escape Me Never" hasn't been seen since the Warner remake, a fate that likewise befell Bergner's last British film, "A Stolen Life", when it too was remade by Warners with somewhat more style and success as a Bette Davis vehicle. In some ways it hasn't dated at all; whatever values it had then, within its theatrical framework, are still there. It is, unusually opulent for an independent British film of 1935; it is hard to realize that Ealing's "Iorna Doone", which we showed last year, is also a 1935 movie.

Where it dates - and whether it does is wholly a matter of one's personal infatuation or otherwise with Miss Bergner - is in the star's performance. Quite certainly, it is both her best and most definitive performance in the small handful of films that she made in Britain in the 50's.

"Catherine the Great" pales beside the von Sternberg/Dietrich "The Scarlet Empress" and "Dancing Lips" was and is a ponderous bore, and 'As You Like It' is an eight-hour production whose labors and four-reel efforts of blame must be attached to her director, Paul Czinner, rather an interesting silent director, but in sound films content to make every film virtually a showcase for Miss Bergner, his wife. (The only one of her starring vehicles that he didn't direct was her Hollywood film, "Paris Calling").

However, fascinating though it is, her performance in "Escape Me Never" - which can create extases in her admirers, and the horrors in others - raises the question of whether she is a superb actress, or a superb technician. In some ways, she is like a feminine George Arliss: always the same, but in total control of every gesture, facial nuance and bodily motion. With Arliss of course, there were always good theatrical properties behind him, whereas Bergner has been a rather fussy director, and eventually some of the blame must be attached to her director, Paul Czinner, rather an interesting silent director, but in sound films content to make every film virtually a showcase for Miss Bergner, his wife. (The only one of her starring vehicles that he didn't direct was her Hollywood film, "Paris Calling").

Bergner admirers however, will have a field-day. And the others can be assured that her most provocative characteristics - the fey, gamine, constantly fidgety and on-the-move mannerisms - are largely concentrated into the early portions of the film. Once the character itself matures, the child-like characteristics recede somewhat, and a more solid - and certainly more acceptable - acting style takes over.

The print by the way is Elisabeth Bergner's own, in mint condition, and fully complete. It is from the original negative and has the British running time of 95 minutes. Most U.S. sources give the American running time as 91 minutes, but I do not know whether this indicates either sloppy press information at the time, or whether in fact four minutes were trimmed out of the U.S. version. Incidentally, one wonders why Bergner & Czinner never got around to Margaret Kennedy's "The Constant Nymph", surely an ideal vehicle & ripe for a remake in the 70's - William K. Everson

My apologies to those latecomers who may have missed out on program notes last week, and extra copies will be available tonight. Unfortunately we have in our midst a program note-nymphomaniac, for want of a better term, who collects notes on mass to distribute to needy persons around the world. A rather laudable ambition, and doubtless appreciated in such outposts of civilization as Alaska and outer Mongolia, but rather hard luck on our own audiences. We're trying to police this situation a little better, short of installing security guards, but if you should miss out on notes at any time, please let me know and extra copies will be provided.

A postscript thought on CHAMPAGNE WANTS: the added money certainly did NOT go on location jaunts! The use of back projection for Vienna is unusually obvious!