Hollywood's England: two variations

W A T H E R I N H E R HAT (Columbia, 1935) Directed by Alfred Santell; produced by Everett Riskin; screenplay by Lawrence Hazard from an original story by I.A.R. Wyle; Camera, Joseph Walker; 70 mins.
With: Pauline Lord, Basil Rathbone, Louis Hayward, Wendy Barrie, Billie Burke, David Niven, Victor Varconi, Nydia Westman, Thurston Hall, Nana Bryant, J.M.Kerrigan, Lawrence Grant, Doris Lloyd, John Rogers.

Hollywood often did extremely well by British-localed stories in the 30's, very frequently much better than the British themselves (examples: "Gavalcade", "One More River", "Berkeley Square") and, as in this film, they certainly made the most of Hollywood's British colony. Alfred Santell's basic good taste prevents the film from being the total soap opera it might have been (and as a parallel Columbia film, "Whom The Gods Destroy" certainly was) and the cast is first-rate. Pauline Lord incidentally was a literal over-night replacement for Ruth Chatterton, who suddenly balked at doing it. Rathbone, as always, is not given to much British restraint, but it's good to see him in an off-beat and sympathetic role, and it's also interesting to see David Niven and Wendy Barrie at the beginning of their Hollywood career already (respectively) self-assured and very lovely. The English milieu is warm and evocative, if not always totally accurate: Hyde Park's political agitators work in the daytime, not at night!

Ten Minute Intermission

THE MASQUERADER (Sam Goldwyn-United Artists, 1935) Directed by Richard Wallace
Screenplay by Howard Estabrook and Moss Hart from a story by Katherine Cecil Thurston and a play by John Hunter Booth; Art Direction, Richard Day; Camera, Gregg Toland; Music, Alfred Newman; Editor, Stuart Heisler; 84 mins.
With Ronald Colman, Elissa Landi, Jules Dassin, George Bancroft, Claude Gillingwater, David Torrence, Claude Rains, Creighton Hale, Helen Jerome Eddy, Eric Wiston, Montague Shaw, Olaf Hytten.

The Goldwyn-Colman films of the early 30's are a generally unappreciated and too-little seen group of films, dated in the sense that they reflect the genteel qualities of the novels and plays on which they were based, but handsome, polished, and in terms of professional craftsmanship, very much ahead of their contemporaries and virtually undated today. (Films from this group that we have shown in the past: "Bulldog Drummond", "Arrowmith", "The Unholy Garden", "The Devil to Pay"). "The Masquerader" is particularly interesting in that it blueprints to a remarkable degree George Arliss' "His Lordship" and of course another Colman dual-role film, "The Prisoner of Zenda". Certainly, specific scenes in "Zenda" seem to have been worked into it just because they worked so well in this film of four years earlier. David Torrence's role, in relation to Colman, was also repeated by the same actor in Colman's 1937 "Lost Horizon". The mood of "The Masquerader" is a little strange: the general lightness of touch sometimes battles the rather grim undertones (the hardly disguised drug addiction of the politician) and dramatic high-lights sometimes undergo a shifting of gears. Without giving the plot away, the appearance of Colman #1 to save the day for Colman #2 is accomplished by one of the most felicitous and unlikely entrances since Wallace Beery's split-second rescue of Fairbanks at the end of "Robin Hood"! Theatrical and unreal - the political issues that motivate the story are never really spelled out, and Colman's mesmerising speeches in Parliament are done via wipes and cutaways - "The Masquerader" is nevertheless a most entertaining Colman vehicle, and superficial or not, in Hollywood's eyes a real "in depth" drama of the period. Certainly it's good to see the too-often forgotten Elissa Landi again. It's also a most good-looking and glossy production, with expert photography, trick and otherwise, from Gregg Toland who is neither afraid to borrow from the silent era (witness the iris-out) nor to anticipate the future. Although he and Wells were credited with introducing ceilings to sets in "Citizen Kane" (a claim easily disproved via earlier films) it is interesting to note that Toland is already photographing ceilinged sets in this film.

Program ends approx. 10.15.

— William K. Everson

An apology: the last five sets of notes for this series were done rather hurriedly in a single sitting without sufficient time to re-read and correct. Please bear with us if any types have crept in.