An evening of light melodrama from the 30's

INSPECTOR HORNLEIGH ON HOLIDAY (Gaumont-British/20th Century Fox, 1939) Directed by Walter Forde; Produced by Edward Black; screenplay by Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launter, from the radio serial by Hans Wolfgang Prinvin and the novel "Stolen Death" by Leo Grex; adaptation by J.O.C. Orton; Camera: John Cox; Art Director: Petochinsky; Music: Louis Levy; 87 mins.

With: Gordon Harker (Insp. Hornleigh); Alastair Sim (Sgt. Ringham); Linden Travers (Miss Meadows); Wally Patch (Police Sergeant); Edward Chapman (Capt. Fraser); Phillip Leaver (Bradfield); Kynaston Reeves (Dr. Manners); John Turnbull (Chief Constable); Wyndham Goldie (Sir George); and Cyril Connolly, Torin Thatcher, Peter Bull.

Like Dick Barton and other British movie sleuths, Inspector Hornleigh got his start on British radio, though his debut was hardly auspicious. He appeared only in short sketches within a popular weekly variety show. Hornleigh always got his man by spotting the single blunder: that the villain made. Each sketch finished with Hornleigh revealing the miscreant's identity — but withholding the vital clue. Only at the end of the show did he return with the full explanation, giving the audience a little time to mull over the possibilities and hopefully spot the right (and usually only) clue. Oddly enough, the Hornleigh popularity didn't result in a full-scale radio series, but it did result in three movies over 1936/39, economical but slick and highly popular, the last two of them written by Lauder and Gilliat.

The films all co-starred Gordon Harker and Alastair Sim, and they did much to salvage the slipping career of Cockney comedian Harker. Harker was an excellent character comedian, but he was also a star, and it had been getting difficult to come up with suitable vehicles for him. His Hornleigh was really an extension of the Scotland Yard detective he had just played in two Edgar Wallace thrillers, "The Fug" (to be shown here next season) and its sequel, "The Return of the Fug." For Sim, the films were another step up towards better budgeted pictures, and helped to consolidate his growing reputation as a comedian.

Lauder and Gilliat wrote this film, the second of the series (they hadn't worked on the first) between doing "Jamaica Inn" for Hitchcock and "Night Train to Munich" for Carol Reed. With Harker automatically setting the tone for his own characterization, they drew but little from either the radio series or the novel officially given as a source. It's pretty much of an original screenplay, looking like a Lauder/Gilliat film from the very opening gag, and containing both echoes of earlier work, and hints of films yet to come. None of the Hornleigh films were outstanding, nor were they meant to be more than pleasant time-killers, but they did play top of the bill, and were good enough to get into U.S. release. "Inspector Hornleigh on Holiday" is the best of the trio, not least because it is the one most generous with its comedy — and indeed, Alastair Sim virtually takes over on occasion, and has some fine and prolonged sequences. (For the record, the third in the series was "Insp. Hornleigh Goes to It," released in the U.S. under the title "Mail Train").

-- Ten Minute Interruption --

RENDEZVOUS (MG M, 1935) Directed by William K. Howard; Produced by Lawrence Weingarten;
Screenplay by Bella and Samuel Spawack, P.J. Wolfson and George Oppenheimer from "American Black Chamber" by Herbert G. Yardley; Camera, William Daniels; Music, William Axt; 86 mins.


For all of its size and talent, "Rendezvous" is a "fun" movie pure and simple and really needs no more serious analysis than the better Republic serials, Powell's ultra-polished urbanity, and the mildly tongue-in-cheek approach with its frequent comic interjections, prevents any of it from being taken too seriously. Perhaps because of that the sequences of genuine suspense aren't quite as exciting as they might be — but conversely, one isn't prone to quibble over plot absurdities either, or the almost total lack of conviction in the film's very sketchoy World War One milieu. One can sit back and enjoy the pace, the polish, the grand parade of stars and character players, and then forget about it after the "End" title. If this sounds like a negative recommendation, it isn't so intended; rather it is meant to put it in its proper perspective as a relatively minor item in the MGM repertoire, offered then as no more than a transient diversion.

As in Hitchcock's British movies, spies surface everywhere — running elevators with dark, suspicious glances and clicking heels, operating Washington hotels and Mexican farms — all without causing any suspicion among America's rather lax wartime counter-espionage. Also as in Hitchcock's movies, the spies are all dedicated and sincere people (sneaky Frank Reicher— possibly excepted) so that one isn't altogether rooting for their downfall. In fact, the only person one really wants to see bite the dust is heroine Rosalind Russell, presumably in there because a feminine co-star was needed, but doing nothing to help the plot along, and succeeding only in irking William Powell — and us.

(Cont. overleaf)
Made in the vanguard of William K. Howard's MGM years, it's not as recognizably a Howard film as one would like. (New School regulars will recall that we have shown such Howard films as "White Gold", "A Ship Comes In", "Back Door to Heaven", "Surrender" and "Mary Burns, Fugitive"). Given the hokey aspects of the plot, he could well have gone all the way into making this a stylistic exercise with all the moving camerawork, striking angles and bizarre lighting that was so much his forte. It's a pity his old cohort James Wong Howe wasn't associated with him on this one. There's nothing wrong with William Daniels' camerawork, but it's unadventurous and entirely too sober. However, there's nothing really wrong with the direction either, other than that it doesn't really bear Howard's signature. Without the credits to prove otherwise, one could just as well believe that it was directed by W.S. Van Dyke. Indeed, since pace here becomes more important than visual style, it looks more like a Van Dyke picture, a "Thin Man" done against a World War One background - but, alas, without Myrna Loy. (These apparent digs against Rosalind Russell are far from that; they are perhaps digs against an unnecessary role that gives her too little material to work with).

Incidentally, William Axt's musical score is an oddly unambitious one, much of it being lifted quite bodily from his score for "The Big Parade".

William K. Everson

New School regulars, who have seen many Michael Powell-directed films in these series (I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING, THE SMALL BACK ROOM, THE SIT IN BLACK, CANTERBURY TALE, etc.) will be pleased to note that the Museum of Modern Art is doing a full-scale Powell retrospective starting in late November, with Powell on hand to launch it. The series will include some key Powell films that we have never been able to get hold of for these series - THE PHANTOM-LIGHT and CONTRABAND among them - as well as new, restored prints of many films seen here in badly cut form (LIFE AND DEATH OF COLONEL BLIMP, GONE TO EARTH) and superb 35mm Technicolor prints, some of them on original nitrate stock. This is very much an event to look forward to. Most films will be shown twice, so hopefully there won't be major conflicts with our own last two programs in this Fall series.

---

Program finishes tonight at approx. 10:40, followed by short discussion period.