Elegance, sophistication and sensuality

TONIGHT IS OURS (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Stuart Walker; ass't. director, Mitchell Leisen; screenplay by Edwin Justus Mayer from the play "The Queen Was in the Parlour" by Noel Coward; Camera, Karl Strauss; 75 mins.


Noel Coward's plays were brought to the screen for the first time in 1927, a year in which the British made three: "Easy Virtue," "The Constant Nymph," and, made in Germany with a German cast, though as a co-production with Britain and under a British director, "The Queen Was In the Parlour". Although its title, derived from an old nursery rhyme, certainly indicates that it was not meant to be taken too seriously, it was pretty heavy going — and was released in the U.S.A. under the title "Forbidden Love." Tonight's version, the first and only remake, is a much happier affair.

However, "Tonight Is Ours" was not a success at the time, either on its own or in prompting what Paramount would have liked to be their newest screen team of Colbert and March. (Their "Sign of the Cross," was playing in New York concurrently. In some ways, one can understand its failure: Hollywood seemed over-obsessed with glossy European frou-frou at the time, and while it could have been rationalised as escapism in the midst of depression, so much emphasis on money, luxury, the problems of royalty and the rich, could well have rebounded — and probably did. Too, this kind of film needs the panache that Lubitsch, Massilouan and James Whale were providing in their contributions to the cycle, but which isn't altogether present here — or in other similar contemporary films like "Royal Bed." However, having been conditioned to expect a misfire, what results is a delightful surprise, often literally since one is never quite sure in which direction — farce, bitter-sweet romance, comedy-drama — the film is going, and this deliberate refusal to telegraph moods is maintained until the end. Moreover, thanks to Karl Strauss' photography, it's an incredibly lush film visually, and Colbert (especially in her earlier madcap scenes) looks and acts like a movie star. And with the least photographic treatment in her earlier Astoria—filmed movies (such as "Ris Woman," shown last month) the difference here is rather marked.

(March too is well handled by the Strauss camera; rarely have two stars looked so well "groomed" in terms of costuming and lighting, and this of course is in no way intended to minimise their contributions to the film's appeal and personalism). The pictorial opulence is, in the final analysis, the major quality of "Tonight Is Ours." There is a trend of thought that holds that all of the Stuart Walker films assistant-directed by Mitchell Leisen really owe all their merit to Leisen. I don't buy this entirely, as Walker was a notable stage director himself, and his films were away from Paramount and Leisen were equally interesting — but undoubtedly, as a former art director, Leisen did have a considerable input into the visual aspect of the film.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

SPRING IN PARK LANE (Wilcox-British Lion, 1948) Produced and directed by Herbert Wilcox; Screenplay by Nicholas Phipps from "Come Out of the Pantry" by Alice Duex Miller; Camera, Max Greene; released in the US by Eagle-Lion in 1949; 91 mins.


It's a pity that neither of tonight's films was released under the title of its source material; a double-bill of "The Queen Was In the Parlour" and "Come Out of the Pantry" would have looked of British society comedy of the 20's! This particular tale by the prolific Alice Duex Miller was filmed first as a Paramount silent in 1919, remade as a Nancy Carroll musical ("Sunny," in 1929), made again as a musical under its original title by Jack Buchanan in 1935, and then lay dormant until this 1948 remake. Actually, very little of the original remains other than its masquerade premise and society background. However, Wilcox, who had produced the Buchanan version, owned the rights. Creditting Alice Duex Miller not only added a little prestige, but was also easy insurance against claims of plagiarism. Wilcox was always a plodding, never very inspired director, but he had the knack of giving the public what it wanted when it wanted it; not only was the timing for this film absolutely perfect, but it probably represents his best directorial achievement too — due little perhaps to an excellent script and a particularly good cast. It was a tremendous hit in post-war Britain still suffering from austerity and rationing; it was gay, cheerful and optimistic, and seemed to herald a new beginning. The previous Wilcox/Neagle films had been heavy and serious; while serious ones still lay ahead, this led into a string of light-hearted films such as "Maytime in Mayfair" and "Illiac in the Spring" — although the casual exuberance wasn't easy to maintain, and "Spring in Park Lane" was to remain the very best of the group. An enormous money-maker in England, it also did surprisingly well in this country. From its opening scenes, with Anna Neagle striding along to the accompaniment of a traditional old English tune ("Mary One Morning"), it's obvious that Astaire and Pickford aren't the only ones to have a song and dance act. It isn't, although there's a song and a dance, but the lightness of touch and the slight but always amiable comedy give it a subliminal musical lift just the same. Oddly enough, when today's movies are so relentlessly grim (or aggressively funny) it performs such the same function as it did in 1938, and bounces back cheerfully from the 1961 environment. Many of its in-jokes about British films are still pertinent, and Nicholas Phipps, a dry, witty writer and performer (it is he who tells the great "breaks" in the story, then new talent, and one never to be allowed to develop fully, was then at his best. It's froth, a soufflé and no more, but a most engaging one. Anna Neagle, now nearly 80, is still going strong — and dancing a little — in the London revival of "My Fair Lady".

--- William K. Everson ---

Program finishes at 10:25; Since I am out of town this week, we start promptly at 7:30; Summer schedule will be issued next week.