Ealing Comedy: Beginnings and maturity

CHEER BOYS CHEER (Ealing-ATP, 1939) Directed by Walter Forde; Produced by Michael Balcon; Script by Roger MacDougall, Allan Mackinnon, from a story by Ian Dalrymple and Donald Bull; Camera: Ronald Neame; Art Direction, Wilfred Shingleton; Music, Ernest Irving; 84 mins.

With: David Henesy (Crump); Donald Sinden (Trumeades); Nova Pilbeam (Margaret Greenleaf); Peter Coke (John Ironside); C.V. France (Greenleaf); Jimmy O'Dea (Matt Boyle); Alexander Knox (Saunders); Graham Moffat (Albert); Moore Marriott (Geordie); Ivor Barnard (Naseby).

In our notes for two other 1939 Ealing comedies, "Trouble Brewing" and "Young Man's Fancy," shown a season or so back, we filled in details of Ealing's background in the 30's, 1939 was their first year as a real studio entity, and the close teamwork that existed is stressed by the fact that their production crews were small and overlapped from film to film; of their first ten films for example, nine were photographed by Ronald Neame, and seven art-directed by Wilfred Shingleton. Although technically speaking their third comedy, "Cheer Boys Cheer," Ealing's first, is their first traditional comedy, in its sense of romance and particularly battle between individual enterprise and big business, and the efforts to maintain an old but traditional way of life, Made before the war, but in a period of false security when the politicians were assuring us that war would never come, "Cheer Boys Cheer" even offers a kind of mildly smug political propaganda; it is not hard to equate the pleasant old brewer, Greenleaf, with England (and perhaps even with the spirit of Ealing itself) and that of the tyrannical big businessman Ironside, with Hitler. Like most Ealing comedies, it is not uproariously funny instead for gently amusing situations, and a collection of comic types (especially Will Hay's old team-mates, Moore Marriott & Graham Moffat) whose mere appearance, coasting on well-loved comic reputations, was almost enough in itself. Irish-brogued Jimmy O'Dea never quite made it as a comedian; he wasn't quite funny enough in himself to support a whole film, and his Harry Langdon-ish personality wasn't always enough even to support the jokes and gags, in a number of their films, "Cheer Boys Cheer" has enough substance romantic, comic and dramatic to make it both pleasing and satisfying. Its director, Walter Forde, a comedy star of silent 2-reelers, was extraordinarily prolific in a wide range of British films of the 30's and 40's, of which "Rome Express" and "The Ghost Train" were standouts. He is now retired, in Hollywood, and refuses to be convinced that his directorial career produced anything of value. Possibly the Museum of Modern Art's big British cycle at the end of next year will help to prove otherwise.

Ten Min. Interruption —

A RUN FOR YOUR MONEY (Ealing-EDP, 1949) Directed by Charles Frend; Script by Frend, Leslie Norman, Richard Hughes, from a story by Clifford Evans; Camera, Douglas Balcom, Ernest Dibble; 85 mins.

With: Donald Houston (Dai); Meredith Edwards (Twm); Alec Guinness (Whimple); Moira Lister (Jo); Hugh Griffith (Hw); Julie Milton (Bronwen); Clive Morton (Editor); Joyce Grenfell (Mrs Pargerette); Dorothy Bromhall (Jane); Edward Rigby (Tower Beef-eater); Gabrielle Brune (Singer); Patric Doonan (Conductor).

Made ten years after "Cheer Boys Cheer", "A Run for Your Money" had the singular (commercial) misfortune to be released in the same year as, but after, Ealing's "Passport to Pimlico" and "Whisky Galore" (both with strikingly original and even bizarre plots) and the Guinness tour-de-force "My Beautiful Laundrette," critics and public, to whom Ealing comedy tradition had been highly touted, were dismayed that the fourth comedy which was much quieter and more "normal" than the first two, and was not even a vehicle for Alec Guinness, seen (though very effectively) in a supporting role. Granted, it is little more than a string of funny incidents and fairly stereotyped characters, and some of it is a little heavy-handed but still, with its stress on working-class people and comedy situations within a realistic framework, it is far more of a "typical" Ealing comedy than its immediate predecessors; certainly more so than many later ones like "The Lavender Hill Mob" which never had to live up to a reputation to satisfy the overseas markets too. Certainly there is nothing particularly unique about "A Run for Your Money", but it is pleasant, civilised, an enjoyable mixture of warmth and pathos, slapstick and subtlety, a film in fact very much on the same lines as "Cheer Boys Cheer" even though its plot is somewhat simpler, Guinness' bravura role or not, is a joy, as are many of the supporting players in their far more convincing, because of its lack of prestige, and the disappointment of Guinness in a supporting role, it never seems to be revived theatrically, and we're glad of the chance to bring it back to your attention.

— William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.30.

Note: Since I have been back in town for only a couple of days in late November before rushing back to Europe there hasn't been time to prepare the full-scale notes for programs 5 through 8, and due to a smaller pressure of time, had to be done. All four sets of notes will be available on the first program (Feb.11) of the Spring season - a particularly strong program which I suspect will attract most of our regulars. Anyone who is not attending but who would like the notes should drop me a line at the New School (hopefully with a stamped addressed envelope) and the notes will be mailed to you. Thanks for your patience.

SPRING SCHEDULE AVAILABLE NEXT WEEK AND FOLLOWING WEEK.