THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 45: Program #5
March 18, 1953

Women and War: Two off-beat British films

THE SHOW GOES ON (Ealing-Associated British Film Distributors, 1937) Written, Produced and directed by Basil Dean; EXORCIST, 6 mins.

With Gracie Fields, Owen Nares, John Stuart, Edward Rigby.

"The Show Goes On" was the last of Gracie Fields' Ealing films, and though quite ambitious, it was also one of the weakest, slow, heavy-handed and with too many rough edges. But for one sequence at least, it admirably caught the spirit of Britain at that time. The launching of the Queen Mary was an enormous morale booster for the nation, and the film brought with it the realization of national pride, elements neatly combined in this one sequence in which Gracie, aboard the Queen Mary, sings "You've got to smile as you say goodbye" (one of the big sentimental song hits of the period) to troops departing for the Far East.

"The Show Goes On" was released a month before "Farewell Again", and this excerpt complements it extremely well.

FAREWELL AGAIN (United Artists-London Films-Alexander Korda, 1937) Directed by Tim Whelan; Produced by Erich Pommer; Screenplay by Wolfgang Wilhelm, with dialogue by Ian Hay; Camera, James Wong Howe and Hans Schneeberger; Music, Richard Addinsell; US release in 1938 as "Troopship"; 80 mins.

With: Floro Robson (Lucy Blair); Leslie Banks (Col. Harry Blair); Sebastien Shaw (Capt. Gilbert Reed); Patricia Millard (Anne Harrison); Robert Newton (Jim Carter); Renée Ray (Elsa Wainwright); Robert Cochrane (Varlisle); Lebanon Corbett (Lady Joan); Anthony Bushell (Roddy Hammond); Edward Lexy (Sgt. Brough); Edmund Willard (Pte. Withers); Alf Goddard (Pte. Bulger); Wally Patch (Sgt. Major Billings); Jerry Verno (Pte. Judd); Marla Hunt (Adela Swayne); Maire O'Neill (Mrs. Brough); John Laurie (Pte. Mockilister); Billiot Makeham (Major Swayne); David Horne (John Carlisle); J. W. Roberts (Dr. Pearson); Margaret Moir and Margaret MacGowen Billings; Gertrude Mungower (Lilly Troy); Billy Shinn (Corporal Edrich); Eddie Martin (Mrs. Bulger); Phil Ray (Moore); Janet Burnell (Mrs Moore); Vernon Harris (Harry). ERRATUM: Screenplay was by Clemence Dane and Patrick Kivran, from an original story by Wolfgang Wilhelm.

Despite its ambitious (and international) production credits, "Farewell Again" was a relatively unambitious Korda film in a commercial sense. However, at the time (though one might dispute it today) 1937 was considered a poor and economy-conscious year for British films. "Farewell Again" hit exactly the right emotional note for the time, and critics perhaps over-reacted, hailing it as something of a minor masterpiece, and helping it along to considerable commercial success both at home and in this country. Later on, seeing that they had been over-generous, writers about film chose to ignore it completely and relegate it to an unofficial obscurity, though its commercial popularity remained and the film was released at least twice in Britain. Today it can be seen perhaps in its proper perspective: a notable and literate film if not a great one, extremely well acted, and a marvellous time capsule of attitudes of the day — ranging from unstressed class distinction to such downplayed patriotic fervour as Leslie Banks telling his men "We own an empire - and we've got to pay for it!" Although it deals with a peacetime period, it is perhaps even more poignant than its wartime parallels, since it is concerned with men separated from their men because of remote skirmishings abroad rather than defense of homeland.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE WEAKER SEX (Two Cities-Rank-General Film Distributors, 1949) Directed by Roy Baker; Produced by Paul Soeskin; Screenplay by Arthur Macrae from the J.B. Priestley play "No Madam"; Camera, Erwin Hillier; Music, Arthur Wilkinson; released in the US in 1949 by Eagle-Lion; 89 mins.

With: Ursula Jeans (Martha Dorce); Cecil Parker (Geoffrey Radcliffe); Joan Hopkins (Heleen); Derek Bond (Nigel); Lena Morris (Lolly); Thora Hird (Mrs Gaye); John Stone (Roddy); Digby Wolfe (Benjie); Marian Spencer (Harriet); Dorothy Bramhall (Mrs Malling); Kynaston Reeves (Capt. Dishart); Bill Owen (Soldier); Eleanor Summerfield (clipper); Gladys Hanson.

Tonight's two films should gravitate together rather well, since not only are they related in theme, but both had their New York openings at the Little Carnegie. The former was a loose equivalent of such earlier Ealing films as "Merry Jug", "Mrs Miniver" would be an ideal subject to be included in the filmic area of the upcoming "Salute to Britain" Festivities. However, it's unlikely to be as is a film totally forgotten both here and in England, and, probably because of its lack of star names, was usually unplayed even by tv stations that had paid for it. Long out of circulation both theatrically and on tv, one can't booster the case of "Farewell Again" in the television era. The NY Times review was quite surprisingly enthusiastic and laudatory, but even then it was an anachronism: a film dealing with a subject that seemed quite dead and already covered in other movies. Nevertheless, it is quite a remarkable film: for a peace-time, post-war film (dealing with the end of the war and the first days of peace, which retained all of the austerity and lack of comfort of the war years, without any apparent reason for it, and with mementos of immediacy of such wartime films as "Millions Like Us", it seems to be reflecting rather than re-creating.

--- End of the news article ---
Author Esther McCracken seems none too shy about being influenced by Noel Coward, and the film is a fairly calculated attempt to adapt the format, style and characters of "Cavalcade" to a "Brief Encounter" milieu. True, the social level is slightly below that of "Cavalcade" and the period covered is much briefer. But the attitudes are much the same, and towards the end are expressed in a similar if less florid toast. And the class conscious commentary, while less emphasised, is still there. The hired help is quaint and slightly vulgar, ordinary soldiers are genial rascals, and the family around whom the story revolves all seem to have commissions in the Navy. However, given that framework, the film is remarkably accurate within it, and the characterisations, though they might seem a bit too good to be true today, often exactly right.

(Ursula Jeans blowing off steam as she hangs out the washing is a particularly shrewd and honest piece of writing; I have watched two well-loved aunts react in exactly that manner on several occasions!)

Although women's roles in wartime Britain were certainly acknowledged in many films, such films did tend to concentrate on the forces ("The Gentle Sex"), nursing ("The Lamp Still Burns"), factory workers ("Millions Like Us"), landgirls ("The Tawny Pipit") and so forth, rarely on the housewife. Perhaps this one was rather overshadowed by Oelis Johnson's performance in "Brief Encounter", which, while it didn't really deal with wartime experiences, certainly delivered its own kind of tribute to the housewife.

"The Weaker Sex" was the second film to be directed by Roy Baker, who with "The October Man" had established himself as one of the major new directors. He never quite lived up to his potential, but his career remained interesting. However, it's odd that for his second film he wasn't handed something that could maintain his initial momentum rather than a film like this, where the writing and acting are everything, and where a director really has very little to do.

The play is opened up somewhat for film purposes, and the constant intercutting of invasion footage and the V-2 rocket bombs probably wasn't really necessary in 1948, when the events were too well remembered to need visual reminders. Today however, this footage is useful in putting the film into a kind of historic perspective. Too, while the exteriors are few, they are extremely well chosen and even the backdrops, glimpsed outside of windows, while they may look like theatrical backdrops, do at least have the right scenery on them. Very appropriately for the story being told, it is set just a few miles outside of the naval town of Portsmouth - and those who know the area will recognise Portchester Castle and other landmarks in several scenes.

The cast, while not top-heavy with major names, is a good one. Ursula Jeans (how difficult it is to separate her from Isabel Jeans since they looked so alike and their careers spanned the same silent/sound years) rises superbly above the theatrical quality of much of her dialogue, climaxed by a marvellously Cowardian moment when her daughter, looking at theirusterity clothes, remarks how shoddy they have become, and with great dignity she replies "Shabby perhaps, but not shoddy!" Joan Hopkins was a lovely young actress who had the misfortune to look exactly like Phyllis Calvert, already well established, so that her career went virtually nowhere.

"The Weaker Sex" underplays its dialogue and downplays its patriotism, but can't altogether escape the accusation of being a bit smug in doing so. The musical score is rather interesting, occasionally approaching the Hollywoodian sweep of a Young or a Korngold. It uses wartime songs quite effectively, but doesn't overdo them, since this was far too early to be aiming at "instant" nostalgia. The film must have one of the most undynamic and unshownlike endings ever; having said all it has to say, and with the mood of the times not indicating too optimistic a peep into the future, it just suddenly shuts up shop and flashes on its "End" title. One can't help wondering how they managed a little curtain excitement on stage!

Incidentally, judging from some streaks on the right side of the screen in the film's first third (not annoying or distracting Fortunately) the negative seems to have suffered some damage, which may be another reason why it seems to be out of circulation. Anyway, like its co-feature, it's not a great film or a major rediscovery - but it's a good film and a very satisfying one, and we're glad to be able to bring them both back to life this evening.

Program Ends app. 10.40. — William K. Everson
No discussion this evening, but questions can be held over until next week, when the program is quite short.