Wartime Ealing Studios: Documentary & Fiction Intertwined

NINE MEN (Ealing, 1942; rel: 1943) Directed by Harry Watt; Assoc. Producer, Charles Crichton; Script by Harry Watt from a story by Gerald Kersh; Camera, Roy Kelino; Music, John Greenwood; 68 mins. With Jacques Lamb, (Sergeant Watts); Gordon Jackson (Young 'Em); Frederick Piper (Sergeant Hall); Grant Sutherland (Jock Scott); Bill Blewett (Bill Parker); Eric Micklewood (Bucky Lee); John Varley (Dusty Johnstone); Jack Horsman (Joe Harvey); Richard Wilkinson (Officer); Giulio Finzi (Italian mechanic).

"Nine Men", with its roots in such pre-war films as "The Thirteen" and "The Lost Patrol", and itself somewhat of a blueprint for Carol Reed's "The Way Ahead", was documentarian Harry Watt's first full-length feature. Although some of the players later became quite well known, especially Gordon Jackson, they were all new faces then, lending the film a documentarian flavor, and indeed the best of Watt's later features (especially "The Overlanders"), shown last Summer remained essentially documentarian in style and theme. "Nine Men" took British audiences by surprise in 1943. Used to somewhat dull and unshowmanlike British propagandist documentaries, they found that this one had surprising warmth and real excitement in its lively hand-to-hand combat scenes. (This was before the Hollywood war films like "Gung Ho" had brought stuntman expertise to savage battle scenes, and long before British directors had learned to emulate Hollywood in this area). In a purely documentary sense, the early training scenes are perhaps the best, being astonishingly "right" in detail, and also establishing a very real and convincing picture of the wartime relationship and mutual respect between sergeant and platoon, and the temporary abandoning of social barriers. Even the melancholy sadness of a parade ground in a rain-soaked dusk seems perfectly captured - but since British parade grounds always looked like that, perhaps that was the least of Watt's accomplishments. The greatest, perhaps, was in the use of a bare, fenced area of sand to double for the Libyan desert, and bringing in this whole, ultra-professional film for as little as twenty thousand pounds. In later years there was some criticism of the then condescending and unshowmanlike attitude towards the Italian prisoner, but at the time there were no complaints. Indeed, it was refreshing to find the Italians being treated as a serious enemy, not as the stereotyped joke that was prevalent at the time (reaching its height perhaps later in the year in Billy Wilder's "Five Graves to Cairo").

Ten Minute Intermix

JOHNNY FRENCHMAN (Ealing, 1945) Directed by Charles Frend; Script by T.B.B. Clarke; Cameras, Roy Kelino; Music, Clifton Parker; 105 mins. With Françoise Rosay (Ida Fiorre); Patricia Roc (Sue Pomeroy); Tom Walls (Nat Pomeroy); Ralph Michael (Bob Tremayne); Paul Dupuis (Yan Kervaro); Frederick Piper (Zacky Perro); Arthur Hambling (Steven Mathews); Grace Arnold (Mrs Mathews); Judith Fusse (June Mathews); Bill Blewett (Dick Trewhiddle); Carol O'Connor (Mr. Harper); Alfie Bass (Corporal); Beatrice Varley (Mrs Tremayne); Brussels Wills (Miss Bennett); Paul Bonfils (Jerome); James Hardcourt (Joe Pender)

Set in Cornwall (and half of it in the pre-war years), this is a much gentler film, essentially a romance with an underlying plea for Anglo-French unity. This was essentially achieved; if the British disliked the Germans and misunderstood the Americans, then they distrusted the French, a fact underlined by the fact that the war was almost over before this film was made, and the French still come off as being a bit below the standards the British would like! (But if the French seem shifty, then the British seem stuffy, so for such a simple, uncomplicated tale it's a bit long in the footage although these days it's rather nice to sit back and watch a non-dynamic, unsensational film which takes its time and concentrates more on people than events. The few action scenes, such as the wrestling competition, seem deliberately low-key in the excitement they withhold, while the battle between Cornish fishermen and French orch-workers can't hold a candle to Richard Talmadge's staging of the salmon-poaching fights in Hollywood's "Spawn of the North" in 1930. But whenever the film focusses on faces or scenes of locals, especially to the French Rosay is graciously given top billing. Tom Walls, formerly Britain's Groucho Marx, was by now comfortably settled in to character roles, Patricia Roc is somewhat maddened and wasted this time but still a pleasure to watch, and Ralph Michael, the definitive Ealing hero, is again bland, a good sport - and a loser. Duncan Sutherland, who also art directed "Nine Men", doesn't do quite as much justice here, but here does always mesh too well with the extensive Cornwall location shooting, but that's a minor matter. Like so many 40's British movies, its morality now seems quite out of date, but that's much more our fault than the film's! Unspectacular and perhaps not even particularly memorable, "Johnny Frenchman" is today just what it was almost forty years ago - solid, satisfying, uninspired, but most enjoyable.

William L. Everman

Footnote: "Johnny Frenchman" was the first Ealing film to be released through Rank's newly formed Eagle-Lion company, designed only for prestige films.