Post-war Britain: Two Views

GIRL ON APPROVAL (British Lion/Bryanston, 1961) Directed by Charles Frend;

An Eyeline Production, produced by Harold Orton; Screenplay, Kathleen White;
Camera, John Coquillon; Music, Clifton Parker, 75 mins.

With: Rachel Roberts (Anne Howland); James Maxwell (Tom Howland); Annette
Wardroper (Ethel); Glynne Dymond (John Howland); Michael Clarke (William Howland);
Ellen McIntosh (Mary Gardner); Pauline Letts (Mrs Cox)

Our last three programs have all been fairly sure-fire, in a purely entertainment
sense. Now, we're back to our more usual stan of films that are interesting and
offbeat and fairly obscure, but also, hopefully, entertaining as well! "Girl on
Approval" has, perhaps understandably, had no release here, but its honesty and
realism make it a marked contrast to the Wilcox-Nagle fantasy-conception of life
in post WW-2 Britain. Since it deals with an overall and persistent problem
rather than a specifically war-related one (the girl is just a shade too young, and
the film is, in its date, to be about youth problems coming out of wartime separations) it
doesn't try to be socially profound or even to offer unduly
systematic solutions. If it weren't for the presence of a fine actress -
like Rachel Roberts, it would almost pass as a semi-documentary, and indeed its
realism is one of its strongest assets. Its portrait of middle-class life
is unvarnished and honest, so much so that often one is unsure whether much
of the film was shot in an actual house or in a usually well-suggested studio set.

Charles Frend, unstartled as a documentarian, directs in a deliberately unshowy
but effective manner.

— Ten Minute Interruption —

ELIZABETH OF LADYMead (British Lion-Imperial, 1949) Produced and Directed by
Herbert Wilcox; Original story and screenplay by Frank Harvey Jr., with
additional dialogue by John P. Wilmot; Camera: Max Greene; Designed by
William C. Andrews; Musical Director, Robert Farmon; Technicolor: 97 mins.

With Anna Neagle (Betty/Elizabeth/Betty/Lis); Hugh Williams (John, 1946); Bernard
Lee (John, 1903); Michael Laurence (John, 1919); Nicholas Phipps (John, 1894);
Isabel Jeans (Mother, 1903); Hilda Bayley (Mother, 1946); Michael Shelley (Major
Wrigley, 1905); Jack Allen (Major Wrigley, 1946) and Henry Edwards, Norman
Peters, Ken Warrington, Claude Ballard, Jean Anderson, Hamly Bremner, Catherine Paul,
Edward Norfield, Eddie Martin.

Thanks to the unexpected but huge (and deserved) success of the prior Neagle/  
Wilcox film, and suddenly found in her career at a new peak. "Elizabeth of Ladmead" was
designed to cash in on that momentum, to give Neagle an elaborate vehicle in
which she could do everything she'd done before in one package. Because it was to
be so much "her" film, her popular co-star of earlier films, Michael Wilding, was
dropped this time out. Although an expensive production in every way, it shows
signs of being conceived hurriedly. Many angles are never developed (when in the Modern story Neagle walks into a door that isn't
there, one expects it to materialise as an element in an earlier period - and it
doesn't) and in one episode, the Neagle character is so brash and unsympathetic
that one suspects that the writers were so enraptured by the visual possibilities
of 20's decor that they gave insufficient attention to character motivation. But
superficially at least, its Farber-like structure — the young to the stunner-bet
in terms of costuming and direction, and superb Technicolor photography.
This, alas, is where it ends; it has been shown on television, but its theatrical
exposure, if any, was limited to a much-edited version in black and white. Our
print is an excellent original Technicolor one, fully intact. (Of that there can
be no doubt) It's rather typical of the general behind-the-scenes tendencies of all Neagle/Wilcox films that only in 1949 did they get around to discussing post-
war problems, and then only in a rather unrealistic manner. Returning soldier (an
officer of course) Hugh Williams wants only to "better about... and do the
"little things" — feasible perhaps when living in a servant-stocked mansion and
with a revenue-producing estate and independent income, but hardly typical of the
average postwar plighted. The film is, however, a little ahead of its day, in
remitting (without daring to offer any solutions or even semi-solutions) some of the
problems of women's liberation, and as a spokesperson (1) for that Anna Neagle
makes one wish she would marry (John) a little younger so that she could add Margaret
Sweeney to her collection of historic ladies that have included Nell Gwyn, Queen
Victoria, Amy Mollison, Odette Churchill and Florence Nightingale. Talking of age,
in 1949 we were inclined to be a little intolerant of "mature" stars. The film
opens by introducing us to the house, Ladmead — "This is Ladmead" — and then, as
Neagle enters: "This is Elizabeth"... Neagle must have been tempted to add "And here are
her filters" as the Technicolor camera accommodated her. At the time it seemed
equivocally unlikely that either she or Humphrey Bogart could usefully serve out
their recently announced new long-term contracts. But Bogart's best work - some of
it anyway — still lay ahead, and Neagle, now in her 80's, is still an active and
appealing performer on the London stage. Hardly a "good" film, "Elizabeth of
Ladmead" is nevertheless fascinating on several levels, and a film that is as
ambitious, and so good just to "look at", surely deserves at least one big-screen
showcase in New York.

Program finishes: 10:45

Discussion precedes screening tonight.

— WM.K. Evers —

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