British school-life: two views, prewar and postwar.

THE HOUSE MASTER (Associated British Picture Corp.-Pathé, 1938) Directed by Herbert Brenon; Screenplay by Dudley Leslie and Elizabeth Meehan from the play "Bachelor Born" by Ian Hay; Camera, Otto Kanturek; 95 mins.

With Otto Kruger (Charles Donkin); Diana Churchill (Rosemary Faringdon); Phillips Holmes (Capt. Rance); Joyce Barbour (Miss Faringdon); Rene Ray (Dorothy Faringdon); Kynaston Reeves (Rev. Ovington); Walter Hudd (Frank Hasting); John Wood (Flossie Nightingale); Cecil Parker (Sir Berkeley Nightingale); Henry Hopworthy (Bimo Faringdon); Michael Shepley (Beamish); Jimmy Hanley (Travers).

In his peak years as a top Hollywood director in the 20's, Herbert Brenon brought to the screen, with admirable taste and fidelity to the originals, such British literary works as "Beau Geste", "Correl and Son", "Peter Pan" and "A Kiss for Cinderella". While his prestige is the sound period never equaled that of the earlier years, he continued to make interesting films, though from the mid-30's on, only in England. "Housemaster" was the most important and by far the best of his British films, and the original play by Ian Hay - warm, light, witty but with serious undertones - was ideal material for Brenon. He stuck to the play (and the novel, which was most of "The House Master") with remarkable fidelity to mood and characters. Almost all of the dialogue is verbatim from the novel, and there is only one minor change: in the novel, the confirmed bachelor hero sticks to his bachelorhood. Told from the teachers' point of view primarily, the film is warm but also surprisingly accurate. The near venomous headmaster of Kynaston Reeves - a superb performance - is a dead ringer for one of my own headmasters, who alas was not removed by the cunning scripting convenience that Ian Hay provides. Otto Kruger is equally fine in what may well have been his best role, and Phillips Holmes is especially effective as the wealthy Sir Berkeley Nightingale, whom the characters regard as the class-clown for the first time. Sadly this sensitive but hitherto rather ineffectual actor, seemed also to be just "faking" himself as an actor - but was killed shortly thereafter, in the early stages of the war, in service with the RAF.

When "The House Master" was initially released in the U.S., it was, perhaps understandably, given quite a substantial trimming, some 15 minutes or more coming out. Our print fortunately is of the full British version.

Ten Minute Intermission

THE GUINEA PIG (Pilgrim/Pathé, 1948) Produced and Directed by Roy Boulting; Screenplay by Warren Chetham Strode, Bernard Miles and Roy Boulting from the play by Strode; Camera, Gilbert Taylor; 96 minutes.

Later released in the U.S. as "The Outsider". With Bernard Miles (Jack Read); Sheila Sim (Lynn Hartley); Bernard Miles (Mr. Read); Cecil Trimble (Mr. Hartley); Robert Fleming (Nigel Lorraine); Edith Sharpe (Mrs Hartley); Joan Hickson (Mrs Reade); Peter Reynolds (Grimmett); Timothy Bateson (Ronald Tracey); Clive Baxter (Gregory); Basil Cunard (Duckton); John Forrest (Pritch); Maureen Glynne (Bessie); Brenda Hagen (Lorna Beckett); Herbert Lomas (Sir James Corfield); Anthony Newley (Miles minor); Anthony Nicholls (Mr. Stringer); Wally Patch (Uncle Percy).

With "Goodbye Mr. Chips" coming in between, "The Guinea Pig" (from the same company that made "The House Master") presents a decidedly different and less happy post-war view. It's the story of a working-class boy experimentally being sent to a "high class" school. With class distinction so much a part of British life, though somewhat blunted and shunted aside during the war years, British films very democraically had no qualms about making films on themes of class distinction. But since most of the key filmmakers came from higher-education backgrounds, they tended to perpetuate the class-clause myths rather than demolish them. Working-class families in British films were usually treated as "common" or "dull", and likely to be an embarrassment through not knowing how to behave when confronted with their "betters". Richard Attenborough is so sullen here that one can't altogether blame his classmates for taking a dislike to him. Justice and fair play win out in the end, as they have to - and to Britain's credit, as they probably would in life - but the film does leave the viewer slightly puzzled as to whether both classes would be better off if each stayed where they belonged. "The Guinea Pig" is divided into three levels. It is a piece of first-class theatre in the tradition of "The Winslow Boy" and "The Browning Version", but it's also an unwittingly and socially valuable mirror to conditions and attitudes that were supposedly changing, but in reality weren't. The cast is extremely solid, though Attenborough is a little too perfectly type-cast in the kind of role he had been doing for too long. (Not that he had been playing child roles - but he had been playing roles with the same attitudes. He has a very real talent for both good and bad, of actually simulating an adolescent, but it's a pity that Britain had no solid actor to take on the role. Attenborough's wife, Sheila Sim, appears in the feminine lead - an excellent and charming actress who, unfortunately cut short her career to concentrate on being Mrs Attenborough, and to allow her husband to continue as a useful actor and eventually a mediocre director. In retrospect, one might wish that Mr. A. had retired to being a husband, and left Sheila Sim's career to prosper.

Program Ends approx. 10:50

- William K. Everson