Two Civilised British Mysteries: Tey and Canning

(Note: due to the jazz concert preceding the screening, a possibly slightly late start thereby and a relatively lengthy program, introduction and discussion will be eliminated this evening. Hold your questions for next week's discussion session).

THE FRANCHISE AFFAIR (Associated British-Fathe, 1951) Directed by Lawrence Huntington; Screenplay by Huntington and Robert Hall from the novel by Josephine Tey; Camera, Gunther Krampf; Music, Phillip Green; Produced by Robert Hall; 88 minutes US release: 1952 by Stratford Pictures With: Michael Denison (Robert Blair); Dulcie Gray (Marion Sharpe); Anthony Nicholls (Kevin McDermott); Marjorie Fielding (Mrs Sharpe); Ann Stephens (Betty Kane); Athene Seyler (Aunt Lin); Kenneth More (Stanley Peters); John Bailey (Inspector Grant); Hy Hazell (Mrs Chadwick); Avice Landone (Mrs Wynn); Maureen Glynes (Rose Glyne); Peter Jones (Bernard Chadwick); Moultrie Kelsall (Judge); John Warwick (Carley).

"The Franchise Affair" is little known in this country, opening a year and a half after its English release and premiering at the Little Carnegie Theatre. Stratford Pictures, which released it, was an Allied Artists subsidiary, a small virtually one-man operation which made little effort to push the British films it was contractually obligated to handle for Pathe, which released the Allied product in Britain. It disappeared fairly quickly, and never resurrected, its demise undoubtedly hastened by Bosley Crowther in the NY Times virtually hurling insults at it: "an hour and a half of sheer boredom", "utter banality" and "miserably lacking in distinction of any kind". Of course, after an introduction like that, it has nowhere to go but up! However, I suspect that this is one of many instances where you will disagree wholeheartedly with Mr. Crowther. It is not, admittedly, a dynamic picture. Rather it is a cozy, thoroughly satisfying little picture, and viewing it is the equivalent of curling up by a nice fire with a cup of Ovaltine. Not much really happens, and all that does is conveyed by talk: but it's good, well-written and splendidly acted talk, and often very amusing and witty to boot. The plot is a most intriguing one, and perhaps the only real complaint is that it deserved a more enterprising denouement -- though a "big" ending might have robbed it of its naturalistic honesty. Josephine Tey who wrote it (and also the novel that was the basis for Hitchcock's "Young and Innocent") was a writer very much in the Agatha Christie manner, though even gentler. The small town and rural milieu is most convincingly presented, and Michael Denison and Dulcie Gray as always make a most pleasing team. (Married off-screen, they co-starred in a half-dozen very popular films of the 40's and 50's, something of a British Garson-Pidgeon team though rather more varied in their subject matter. They continue to be very active on the London stage, both as a team and individually; not too long ago Gray was a miscast yet rather pleasing Miss Marple). Denison's proposal to Gray nearing the end of the movie is so low-key that it represents an extreme even for British understatement; in case you miss it, we'll tip you off in advance that it takes place during a conversation in a small car! The intricacies of the British legal profession are presented rather realistically and all told it's a delightful picture, quite one of the best of its normally rather routine director, Lawrence Huntington, who usually had stronger meat in his screen thrillers but, "The Upturned Glass" excepted, frequently failed to realize their full potential. In any event, looking around at the gory, mayhem and slaughter on most of the other screens in town, we think you'll enjoy a film in which nothing is killed but time, and that rather pleasantly.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

THE GOLDEN SALAMANDER (Rank-GFD-Eagle Lion, 1950; US release 1951) Directed by Ronald Neame; produced by Alexander Galpersen; Screenplay by Neame, Lewis G. Storm and Victor Canning, from the novel by Canning; Camera, Dudley Lovell; Fredeide Francis; Music, William Alwyn; 96 minutes. With: Trevor Howard (David Redfern); Anouk (Anna); Herbert Lom (Rankil); Walter Rilla (Paul Serafis); Wilfried Hyde-White (Agno); Jacques Sernas (Max); Miles Malleson (Supt. Deufet); Peter Copley (Aribi); Marcel Pencin (Dominic); Eugene Deckers (Police Chief); Kathleen Boutilier (Mrs. Guillaud); Sybilla Binder (Mme. Lgbree); Henry Edwards (Jeffries).

Uncle Bosley seemed much happier with this one, finding it lively and colorful. Although it has its elements of mystery and intrigue, Victor Canning wrote mainly novels of adventure and suspense, so "The Golden Salamander" is quite at the opposite end of the spectrum from "The Franchise Affair", except in its shared qualities of taste and gentility. In comparison (over....)
with its co-feature, it is a much faster-paced film. It doesn't have a great deal of action, but it moves, develops plot in terms of new characters and changing locations, and certainly benefits from the considerable location shooting in Tunis. Of course, it lacks the rugged action and frenzied pace of a parallel American film - Raoul Walsh's "Background to Danger" being the perfect example - but it doesn't try to be that kind of film, although Herbert Lom and Walter Hills don't do badly as home-grown Greenstreet/Lorre menaces. British films, then still riding on the (diminishing) crest of their wartime and immediate post-war success, were still trying for "class", aiming at the American market with suspense and adventure tales of this type and "Sleeping Car to Trieste", but not in any way trying to copy the Hollywood product. That would come later and would prove unsuccessful. "The Golden Salamander" had a good deal going for it, not least in that Trevor Howard was still at his peak as a relatively new romantic leading man who was also a major actor of distinction, and this film immediately followed the enormously successful "The Third Man". Causing even more excitement at the time was new French star Anouk (Aimee) who had taken London critics (and art-house audiences) by storm with her performance in Cayette's "Les Amants de Verone". This was her follow-up picture and there was intense curiosity about it - and her ability to play in English. Actually she does quite well, but her role in "Verona" was unique, a once-in-a-lifetime role that came when she was exactly the right age, and would never be repeated, although in maturity she became a very valid actress. In the U.S. "Salamander" and "Verona" were released within a week or two of one another, but the latter VERY much cut, and causing less excitement thereby.

Director Ronald Neame (this was only his second film, following another thriller "Take My Life") had formerly been an excellent cameraman and then a producer. Like so many cameramen turned directors, he was a far better cameraman than he was a director, but still his directorial career was nothing to be pushed aside lightly, and his Alec Guinness film "The Card" ("The Promoter") is something of a minor classic and one of Guinness' best if least-appreciated works.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.46.