Two off-beat British comedies from the 40's

(i am away this weekend and thus films will start promptly at 7,30 without an
introduction. As indicated last week, these are both rather curious and
unorthodox comedies, and since neither was released here theatrically,
virtually nothing has been written about them in this country. without some
foreknowledge, they are likely to catch one a little off-balance; thus, those
of you who like the surprise element and read the program notes only after the
screening are advised, on this occasion, to at least skim through them first).

---

MY LEARNED FRIEND (Ealing Studios, 1943) Directed by Basil Dearden and Will
Hay; Script by John Dayton and Angus MacPhail; Camera, Wilkie Cooper;
Music, Ernest Irving. 74 mins. Produced by Michael Balcon; Songs: Peter Noble
With Will Hay (William Fitch); Claude Hubert (Claude Babbington); Mervyn
Johns (Grimsnaw); Laurence Harvery (Sir Norman); Aubrey Mallalieu (The Magist-
rate); Ernest Thesiger (Ferris); Charles Victor ("Safety" Wilson); Derna
Hazard (Glories); Leslie Harcourt (Garmen); Eddie Phillips (Basher Blake); G.H.
Mulcaster (Dr. Soudamore); Lloyd Pearson (Colonel Chudleigh); Gibb McLoughlin
(Butler); Maudie Edwards (Aladdin).

Will Hay, one of the most popular British comedians of the 30's and 40's, has
always been difficult to "sell" to American audiences. The easiest way is
to take the often brilliant visual sight-gag highlights from his best films and
show them as excerpts; but on the other hand, this eliminates the complex and
unusually unsympathetic character itself, somewhat akin to that of W.C.Fields,
though the gags themselves are often more reminiscent of Keaton. It is the
oral aspect of Hay that usually defeats Hay over here; a graduate of British
music halls and radio, he usually tended to talk too much in his movies, and
since he was partnered in the best of his Gainsborough comedies by Moore
Marriott and Graham Moffatt, that meant a trio of assorted and relentlessly
non-stop accents to contend with. (While some of the earlier Hayes, especially
"Oh Mr. Porter" and "Where's that Fire?", have gone down very well at the New
School, one of them - "Old Bones of the River" - probably still holds some kind
of record as the most unpopular film we ever showed. (At least, the New
School became kind of outpost of Empire in upholding the traditions of the
British Music Hall!)

"My Learned Friend" was not popular with the critics in England. It was to be
Hay's last film, and his illness already shows. Unlike his previous three for
Ealing ("The Ghost of St. Michael's"; "The Black Sheep of Whitendale" and "The
Goose Steps Out") it was unconnected with the war and comic spies and
saboteurs, set in a never-never-land that was presumably pre-war. And rather
surprisingly, the best of the comedy was carried by Hay's partner, Claude
Hulbert (brother of Jack). Hay's bantering patter was largely limited to the
opening courtroom scenes, and it was slowed down to a point where it was more
understandable to non-Hay specialists. For these and other reasons, even though
it is one of the lesser Hay vehicles, it is probably far more enjoyable to
American audiences than most of them. Another reason for its relative
critical unpopularity in England at the time is that it is essentially a
"black" comedy about murder, a genre that was still relatively new, especially to
British film. Today of course that very element makes it seem fresher and
less dated.

Perhaps its major interest today is as an integral part of the big body of
Ealing Studios work, in which relationships - usually by content and scenarist
are quite fascinating. George Formby's "Turned Out Nice Again" is clearly a
forerunner of Guinness' "The Man in The White Suit" and both were written by
John Dayton. Dighton is also one of the scenarists of "My Learned Friend" -
and its story of a systematic yet humorous mass murderer clearly predates
"Kind Hearts and Coronets", also partly written by Dighton. The omnipresence
of Mervyn Johns as the insane killer also provides a casual relationship to
Ealing's "Dead of Night" of just a couple of years later.

Some of it works well, some (the pantomime episode) misfires a little, and the
asylum sequence borders on the tasteless, though largely redeemed by Ernest
Thesiger as one of the potter patients. But it moves very quickly, is quite
elaborately staged throughout and the art direction of Michael Relph (later a
director himself) and the special effects of Roy Kelino, co-ordinated by
production supervisor John Croydon (team-work at Ealing was quite remarkable)
combine to create a cliff-hanger climax on the hands of Big Ben which,
although probably inspired by Harold Lloyd's "Safety Last!" climax, itself
provided the inspiration for the climax of the original and most eminent version
of "The 39 Steps". For its American premiere on a big screen (though it was
never included in tv packages either) we're lucky to have a particularly good
print of the full version. (Later it was reissued in England and cut by well
over a reel so that it could play more easily as a second feature).

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---
VICE VERSA (General Film Distributors, 1947) Written, produced and directed by Peter Ustinov from the novel by F. Anstey; a Ustinov-George H. Brown production; Asst. Director, Michael Anderson; Assoc. Producer, Paul Sheriff; Camera, Jack Hildyard; Music, Anthony Hopkins. 105 mins. (app. With: Roger Livesey (Paul Multitude); Kay Walsh (Mrs Verlayne); Anthony Newley (Dick Multitude); James Robertson Justice (Mr. Grimstone); David Hutcheson (Marmaduke Paradine); Petula Clark (Dulcie Grimstone); Joan Young (Mrs Grimstone); Kynaston Reeves (Dr. Challoner); Patricia Raine (Alice); Vida Hope (Nanny); Harcourt Williams (Judge); Robert Eddison (Mr. Blinkhorn); James Hayter (Headmaster); Alfie Bass (urchin); Hugh Dempster (Col. Ambrose); Peter Jones (Chawner Jr); James Kenney (Coggas).

Even though it is wholly British and thoroughly eccentric - one of those phrases is possibly redundant - one would still have thought that some U.S. distributor would have taken a chance on this film, if only for its novelty, visual splendour and interesting names. But none did, though it was later available in a number of ways, and directed his first film, the well-received "School for Secrets" in 1946, and this was his big bid to become the British Orson Welles. Had he played the role of Mr. Grimstone as well and how he must have wanted to! he might have made just that additional impact required to pull off the hat-trick. Instead, the role made a major comic star of James Robertson Justice, just as "Putting Pretty" did for Clifton Webb. Ustinov remained a potent force in British film, but never an overwhelming one.

"Vice Versa", made for Two Cities Films, releasing through Rank, might have benefitted from the team-work at Ealing, where it would undoubtedly have emerged with a lighter tone. Based on an old British farce, first filmed in 1916, it is an extremely odd film, perhaps closest in spirit to Rene Clair's silent "The Italian Straw Hat". Both films attempted to recreate not only the comedy of Edwardian stage farce, but Ustinov muddles the waters a little by gagged-up main title which seek to put it all in the framework of an early movie.

The plot, basically, is a good and promising one, and undoubtedly the original ancestor of such later farces as Thorne Smith's "Turnabout" or more recently "Goodbye Charlie" or "All of Me". Its main drawback is its obvious conviction that it is being hilariously witty and brilliantly clever at all times. Nothing is thrown away, and it might work better with a little of the Ealing underplaying. It's also too long for its own good. Nevertheless, it is a very luxurious film to look at (the set design and perhaps the omnipresence of the bearded Mr. Justice remind one a great deal of the drawings of Edward Gorey, and this was indeed one of his favorite films) and the cast is full of interesting and (for the most part) likeable players. Anthony Newley, as the child, already shows signs of the arrogance and genius-fixation that supposedly broke up his marriage to Joan Collins. (In the Fall season, you'll get a chance to see the definitive screen performance of the late Maxwell Reed, the first Collins husband, and the one who irritated her the most by trying to sell her off to an Arab sheik! Reed's performance as the seducer of Ann Todd in the little-known "Daybreak" enables him to fully live up to expectations. In the meantime, Collins devotees will have fun watching Mr. Newley in a perhaps equally typical role.)

Some British sources give the running time of the film as 111 minutes; but they may be in error. This print runs a few minutes shy of that, but is from the original negative and I certainly cannot recall, from the original release, any scenes that are not in this print.

Program ends approx. 10.45.

The Summer schedule will be printed along with next week's program notes. There are no disparities between the schedule as available then and the one that will appear (with more descriptive copy) in the school's Summer Bulletin. Anybody not attending next week who would like a copy mailed to him should drop me a postcard c/o the New School.

This might be a good opportunity to re-state a matter of policy. VICE VERSA was shown in the Museum's British series recently. Because of printing deadlines, are own series here is locked in at least six months ahead of time. When we hear of an upcoming duplication, as we did with CHAMPAGNE CHARLIE, and there's still time, we remove it from our series to avoid "wasting" a date. But if the schedules are in print, we leave it alone. News of changes which does not reach all of the audience sometimes causes ill-will and confusion, and in any case the Museum showings are not always convenient and not always unavoidable and justifiable. - - - -