An evening of British Comedy

Introducing RICHARD MASSINGHAM 10 mins.

In a very loose sense, Massingham (actor-writer-producer-director) was Britain's own Robert Benchley, but whereas Benchley varied his roles with a pompous academic here, a bumbling, and unsuspected husband there—Massingham was always the slow-witted British dullard who has to have everything explained to him. As such he was put to especially witty use in Government wartime and postwar information shorts. His familiar face predisposed the audience to accept the message, and his screen persona justified the compressed-time hard sell technique. Some of his most typical shorts are shown in this compilation. A former doctor, he came to film in 1935, and made his last in 1953, the year of his death (at 55). He made only shorts, and would presumably have been a major asset to British comedy, which was always weak on comics who could write and direct their own material.

THE FROZEN LIMITS (Gainsborough-General Film Distributors, 1939) Directed by Marcel Varnel; produced by Edward Black; Screenplay by Marriott Edgar, Arthur Crabtree. With: Flanagan and Allen (Bud and Chee); Nervo and Knox (Cecil and Teddy); Naughton and Gold (Charlie and Jimmy); Moore Marriott (Tom Tiddler); Eileen Bell (Jill); Anthony Hulme (Tex O'Brien); Bernard Lee (Bill McGrew); Eric Clavering (Foxy)

The Crazy Gang was composed of three groups of comic duos, who together made an anarchistic combine rather like the Marx Brothers joined by Olsen and Johnson. The teams also made individual (though less elaborate) films, and were huge London stage favorites. Their insane humor was of the Monty Python variety, and their films were emotional that they (sadly) played down the delirious sentimental ballads of Flanagan and Allen. Since they were primary stage comics, they only made four films for Gainsborough, none of them released here (followed by a 19-years-later comeback film, made independently, and a big disappointment). We showed "Alf's Button Atlcat", their 2nd film, some eleven years ago. The Museum of Modern Art showed #1 "OK For Sound", their own 1937 "Hellzapoppin"") and #4 ("Gasbags", badly dated because of its concentration camp humor!) very recently in their British cycle. This belated and year-delayed American premiere of "The Frozen Limits" knocks off the last of the quartet. Appropriately, the print, which has seen better days but is generally acceptable, was rescued from an English seaside performer just last year. At the time "The Frozen Limits" was considered the Gang's best film, but that may have been partially because as a satire of Alaskan melodrama it had for once a semblance of a plot on which to hang its gags. Actually the first three are all equally good in their own different ways. "The Frozen Limits" takes its time getting under way, and some of the rapid-fire patter may be lost over here - some of the "blue" gags because they are tied in with British music traditions, and the topical asides because so much time has gone by - although a timely gag about Chamberlain is both funny and a little sad. The Alaskan "locations" are sketchy at best, and the film clearly owes a debt to American comedy at times; Moore Marriott's role is virtually a reprise of Mack Swain's in "The Gold Rush". But its second half is quite funny and inventive and has some genuinely amusing gags. -- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

LET GEORGE DO IT! (Ealing Studios, 1940) Directed by Marcel Varnel; Associate Producer, Basil Bearden; Screenplay by Bearden, John Dighton, Austin Melford and Angus MacPhail. Camera, Ronald Neame. 75 mins. (Note: print carries a later and much inferior release in Bernkin's turnaround with George Formby (George); Phyllis Calvert (Mary); Garry Marsh (Mendez); Romney Brent (Slim); Bernard Lee (Nelson); Coral Browne (Ivy); Diane Beaumont (Greta); Torin Thatcher (U Boat Commander); Hal Gordon (Arbuckle); Donald Calthrop (Strickland); Ronald Shiner (Clarinetist); Ian Fleming (Intelligence Officer); Albert Lieven (German radio operator); Percy Walsh (German spy).

The prolific Marcel Varnel had this one in release some four months after "The Frozen Limits", with an Arthur Askey comedy - "The Bandwagon" - in between. Reflecting the new streamlined look of Ealing after 1939, especially in Ronald Neame's camerawork, it was the best-looking and most polished Formby comedy to date. It was also a huge success since early wartime audiences clearly needed escapism (even though the war wasn't very "real" yet) and here was a.n.a very fast moving fast and the film (set in Free Norway) was already dated before release due to Germany's sudden invasion of Norway, although Ealing covered that with an opening title song setting it back in time. After a mildly Hitchcockian opening, we're soon into double-entendre music hall jokes, inevitable blackout gags, some good Formby songs and some surprisingly elaborate slapstick. Missing from this American version however is a dream sequence in which an angel-winged George, in heaven to marry his dream girl, is sent back to capture Hitler first. At the time, it would be of more interest to meg for its propaganda content rather than its humor, but most critics did like it, especially for its neatness. Hitler was not funny and shouldn't be so treated -- forgetting, perhaps, Chaplin's capture of the Kaiser in "Shoulder Arms". The excision is quite seamless, and will be discussed in the introduction.

--- Wm. K. Everson