LIKE "The Great Impersonation", this enjoyable old chestnut was done first as a silent (Jetta Goudal-Clive Brook), again as an early talkie (tonight's film) and then updated to world-war 2 (Margaret Lindsay-Boris Karloff). This middle version is the most entertaining of them all, thanks mainly to von Stroheim. What a joy to see him in the lead of such a film, making the most of every line (though he has a little trouble with pronunciation here and there!) and stealing every scene with his usual unscripted bits of business (smiling lecherously as he unpacks Miss Bennett's lingerie). He even wins our sympathy as he talks Wistfully of his dreams of a honeymoon in the Black Forest: Bennett is charming and Bushell Hollywood's traditionally boyish British officer, living in a Windsor Castle type home and calling his parents "Mater" and "Guv'nor". His father, the first Sea Lord of the Admiralty, goes by the superb name of Sir Winston Chamberlain. It's one of those wonderfully standard spy melodramas about "the" crisis of the war and the master stroke of espionage that can lead to victory. It's rather over-stocked with characters who accept unquestioningly the most unlikely of double-agency is so involved that it seems to go back to Attila the Hun. The film makes no bones about its theatrical ancestry, but it has brevity, and thanks to Stroheim and Bennett, it's good if old-fashioned theatre.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE ROAD BACK (Universal, 1937) Directed by James Whale; Produced by Charles R. Rogers, Associate Producer, Edmund Grainger; Screenplay by R.C. Sheriff and Charles Kenyon from the novel by Erich Maria Remarque; Camera, John Morello and George Robinson; Music, Dmitri Tiomkin; 80 mins. (Last NS showing: July, 1972)

With John King (Ernst); Richard Cromwell (Ludwig); Slim Summerville (Tjaden); Andy Devine (Willy); Barbara Read (Lucy); Louise Fazenda (Angeline); Lionel Atwill (Prosecutor); Noah Beery Jr. (Wessling); Maurice Murphy (Von Hagen); Etienne Girardot (Mayor); Henry Hunter (Bethke); Larry Blake (Well); Gene Garrick (Gieslick); Jean Houverol (Elsa); Greta Gyntle (Maria); Spring Byington (Ernst's mother); Frank Reicher (his father); Laura Hope Crews (his aunt); Charles Halton (Uncle Rudolph); Arthur Hohl (Heinrich); William B. Davidson (Hartsberg); Al Shean (Mr. Markham); Edwin Maxwell (Principal); Samuel S. Hinds (Defense attorney); Robert Warwick (Judge) and Ben Bard, Jonathan Hale, Buddy Roosevelt, Lane Chandler, Tom Steele, Dwight Frye, Edward Van Sloan, Paul Panzer, Francis Ford, William Benedict, Eddie Phillips.

Never reissued nor sold to television, "The Road Back" is one of the more ambitious of Hollywood's (at this stage) rather half-hearted attacks on German militarism. It could have been one of James Whale's major works, but unfortunately it came at a time of change in Universal's management, the old regime was out, and the new regime wanted economical and safe pictures. The grimness of the original script was undercut by new producers insisting on building up the comedy content (f) and by casting as many of Universal's young (and usually very American) male players as possible. While they may have hoped to repeat the star building process afforded to Lew Ayres in the earlier film, giving the lead to stolid and colorless John King (adequate in westerns, serials, actioners and comedies, but even there no more than adequate) was a major mistake. He just didn't have the sensitivity or depth to begin to cope with the difficult leading role. The last straw was frantic editing of the original climax to change an anti-Nazi stance into one attacking militarism generally, Britain, France et al being given equal blame with Germany. It was an artistic and boxoffice disappointment in 1937, but our greater knowledge and appreciation of Whale today makes it a far more interesting film now. Despite the interference, moments of real power remain. Technically Whale remains interesting, bringing the old "Broadway" cliche into exciting play in the street mob scenes, emulating Lewis Milestone's tracking camera in the battle scenes, and getting far more out of his stock company - Lionel Atwill, Edward van Sloan etc. - than from the younger players, though there's an excellent performance from John Emery. Even if Whale had been left entirely alone, it probably wouldn't have been as good as "All Quiet" - but enough remains to suggest that it might have been a very fine film. Its failure marked a turning point in Whale's career; he seemed to lose heart, and studios seemed to lose confidence in him, the latter at least partially due to Universal's shabby treatment of him in the remaining films due under his Universal contract.

--- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.20.