FILM SERIES 62: Program #6

July 12, 1939

Pre and Post World War Two British Thrillers

SPIES OF THE AIR (British National, 1939) Directed by David MacDonald; Produced by John Corfield; Screenplay by Bridget Boland and A.R. Rawlinson from the play "Official Secrets" by Jeffrey Dell; Camera, Bryan Langley; Music, Ronnie Munro; edited by David Lean; 77 mins.

With: Barry K. Barnes (Thurloe); Roger Livesey (Houghton); Joan Marion (Dorothy Houghton); Basil Radford (Maj. Radford); Felix Aylmer (Sir Andrews Hamilton); Henry Oscar (Porter); Edward Ashley (Stuart); Wallace Douglas (Rooper); Everley Gregg (Mrs Madison).

Although war scares were rampant in Britain in 1939, few really thought it would actually happen. Hollywood, officially neutral, was already making fairly strong indications of its upcoming anti-Nazi stance. But Britain, avoiding political issues, merely used the war scares, such as they were, for the launching pad to a series of light-hearted spy thrillers ("Q Planes" being the best) which were both topical and reassuring. "Spies of the Air" is actually based on a play by a writer who would soon achieve moderate success as a writer/director in film. Although there's still a lot of talk, the character-study nature of the play is neatly diverted into a lively thriller by the interpolation of a number of aerial sequences, and a particularly neat Hitchcockian opening in which a short landlady has to stand on a pair of telephone books to receive espionage information which gets the film off to an exciting start via a fast dossack chase, before the action is taken over by calm and confident counter-spy chief Felix Aylmer. From then on it's a matter of good acting, a few plot surprises, and the usual excellent performance from Henry Oscar as his usual slimy blackmailer. No nationalities are named in terms of the enemy agents - though there's never too much doubt about the direction in which we are supposed to look - and the all-purpose plot was neatly dusted off again in the Cold War era for a much more ambitious remake, "The Net" ("Project X-7" in the U.S.), with the Soviet spies very definitely identified, and a good cast headed by Phyllis Calvert, James Donald and Donald Wolfit.

- Ten Minute Intermission -

SEVEN DAYS TO NOON (London Films-British Lion, 1950) Directed by John Boulting; Written by Roy Boulting and Frank Harvey; Camera, Gilbert Taylor; Original story, Paul Dehn and James Bernard; 94 mins.

With: Barry Jones (Prof. Willingdon); Andre Morell (Supt. Polland); Olive Sloane (Goldie); Sheila Sim (Ann Willingdon); Hugh Cross (Stephen Lane); Joan Hickson (Mrs Peckett); Ronald Adam (Prime Minister); Marie Ney (Mrs Willingdon); Geoffrey Keene (agitator in bar); Merrill Mueller (American commentator).

A surprise success both in England and here, and an Academy Award winner for the best original story, this thriller deals with a sensitive but deranged scientist who threatens to blow up London with an atomic bomb unless atomic weapons are outlawed. Soviet war scares had been as rampant in Britain in the post-war years as the German war scares had been in 1939; having been caught napping once, the British were more prone to take them seriously - though without hysteria - in this period. Moreover, if such a standoff had materialised, it wouldn't have been just between the USSR and the USA with Britain as an innocent and possibly neutral bystander; already the Communist shelling of the British gunboat "Amethyst" in the Yang-Tze river had almost caused open conflict. Having just been exposed to a real war, and the problems of evacuation, the British could identify with all the scenes of London preparing for disaster, and organising the evacuation of London. It hit the same kind of nerve as Orson Welles' famous Martian broadcast. The film is however suspenseful without being unrealistic or contrived; there is no real villain other than science itself, the film maintains a sober stance, and there is a neat leavening of humanity and humor. Its popularity paved the way for a follow-up film "High Treason" (which we showed a few seasons back), good but less successful. Then the Boulting Brothers, who had been responsible for a number of serious, off-beat films over a ten year period, suddenly hit commercial paydirt with satiric comedy, and changed directions rather spectacularly, concentrating on comedy from then on, maintaining a high batting average but somehow losing the momentum that seemed about to place them almost in the Powell/Fresserburger class.

Program ends app. 10.31

-- William K. Everson