Two little-known British melodramas from the 40's

THE CALENDAR (Rank-Gainsborough, 1948) Directed by Arthur Crabtree; Produced by Antony Darnborough; Cameras, W. Wyer; Cameramen, Eric Cropper, Cyril Knowles; Len Harris; Sound by Geoffrey Kerr from a play by Edgar Wallace; Music, Arthur Wilkinson; 80 min. With: Greta Gynt (Wenda Panniford); John McCallum (Gerry Anson); Raymond Lovell (Lord Willie); Sonia Holm (Molly Panniford); Leslie Dyer (Sam Hilcott); Charles Victor (John Dory); Barry Jones (Sir John Garth); Felix Aylmer (Lord Forlingham); Diana Dors (Hawkins); Sydney King (Tony) and Fred Payne, O.B.E. Clarence, Noel Howlett, Claude Bailey, Desmond Roberts, Constance Smith, Cyril Chamberlain.

Together with Zane Grey, Edgar Wallace must be just about the most-filmed author anywhere. Not counting television films, there have been somewhere in the region of 175 adaptations of Wallace novels and plays, mainly in Britain and Germany, to a lesser extent in Hollywood, some stories having been filmed as much as half-a-dozen times. At one time his novels were always emblazoned with the slogan (probably a press quote) "It is impossible not to be thrilled by Edgar Wallace". Actually it was quite easy; with such a prolific output, not all of them could be winners, and in any case he wrote comedies and straight dramas as well. Tonight's "The Calendar", unreleased in the U.S.A., is one of the latter. It was filmed earlier, also in Britain (in 1931) and released in the U.S. as "Bachelor's Polly". Not only a really good film, it also had a top cast (Herbert Marshall, Edna Best, Gordon Harker, Nigel Bruce etc.). Tonight's version, virtually identical in plot and incident, even has an identical running time! Even in 1948 however, it was not considered a major film. Rank was then over-producing: his studies had a plethora of stars and directors under contract who had to be kept busy, his distributors needed product to pair up with the American imports that they also handled, and he had two major circuits of cinemas that had to be kept supplied. "The Calendar" was a casual "M" that played top of the bill, but relied on a strong American co-feature to do the business. One reason that it probably never played here was that Rank already pushed its more important product, and it didn't have the names or the action to attract that sort of audience. Or as the competition distributor hopefully had it, "Fool's Gold". The plot being concerned solely with the establishing of a man's honour - a plot element that had long been popular in British films but that was becoming an anachronism in the post-war years, and would certainly seem old-fashioned over here unless (as in "The Four Feathers") it had lots of action to go along with it. Yet more than 40 years after it was made its story plays well and holds attention, and the interplay of an excellent cast is often very interesting. Raymond Lovell, usually cast as a Sydney Greenstreet-ish villain (never as menacing as he might be due to a speech impediment) is cast against type in a comic-pompous role in "The Calendar". Sonia Holm is graceful and lovely as the heroine. Curiously, she never became an "official" star, so like many of the cast members, you'll need to do a bit of research to find them in most of the British reference books, despite an honorable body of work. "The Calendar" is lightweight and hardly riveting, but one does care about the people involved, and it's a good story, well-told.

- Ten Minute Intermittent -

PROGRAM ENDS 10.30

QUESTION/DISCUSION FOLLOWS

MURDER IN REVERSE (British National, 1945; US release in 1946 by Four Continents Films)

Directed by Montgomery Tully; Produced by Louis H. Jackson; Screenplay by Montgomery Tully from a novel by "Seemark"; Cameras, Ernest Paterson, Hans Hargreaves, Hans May; 80 min. With: Billy Hartnell (Tom Masterick); Jimmy Hanley (Peter Rogers); Dinah Sheridan (Jill Masterick); Petula Clark (Jill as a child); Chilli Boucher (Doris Masterick); John Slater (Fred Smith); Wylie Watson (Tailer); Edward Rigby (Spike); Brefnal O'Rourke (Sullivan); Maire O'Neill (Mrs Moore); Ellis Irving (Sgt. Holman); Evelyn Reeves (Cossley, K.C.); John Sale (Blake, K.C.); Aubrey Mallalieu (Judge); Scott Saunders (Landlord); Pauline Edwards (Customer); Ivor Barnard (night watchman); Peter Gashthorne (Lawyer) and Ben Williams, Edinburgh, Cyril Smith, X. Lung, Harry Norton, Henry White, Alfred Harris, Sonny Miller, Johnny Catcher, Dick Francis, Geoffrey Dennis, Cyril Luckham.

British National was either the smallest of the British majors, or the biggest of the independents, depending on one's point of view. Backed by millionairress Lady Yule, they made expensive-looking pictures but usually not very good ones, with a penchant for old-fashioned dramas and sentimental musicals. Mostly they made "M" pictures with "M" running times and budgets, but they had an "in" with the big ABC circuit which played all the WB and MGM films, and needed British films to meet their exhibitors' quota, so the British National films, to the British audiences, got excellent playing time. Once in a rare while they came up with real winners, usually with top directors still on the way up: "Madrigal" (Thorold Dickinson) and "Contraband" and "One Of Our Aircraft Is Missing" (Michael Powell). And also once in a while, one of their smaller pictures clicked too: Vernon Sewell's "Latin Quarter", Lance Comfort's "When We Are Married" and tonight's film, which was both a critical and popular success in England (though the NY Times hated it!) After his huge success in "The Way Ahead", Billy Hartnell was suddenly a name that meant something, and British National tried hard to turn him into something of a British Cary Grant in a number of melodramas and thrillers. Expert at playing the tough sergeant, Hartnell wasn't quite up to the demands of some other roles, and his real stardom eluded him. But "Murder in Reverse", a fringe film noir based on the novel "Conspirators" by the very tough, original and has a strong climax. It's good enough that one wishes it was a little better, but nobody knows that they have, British National hadn't bothered to plug up some of the plot holes. One finds it hard to believe that an obviously intelligent young teen-ager like Petula Clark wouldn't recognise her Father when she showed up 15 years later; also that 15-year stretch reintroduces Hartnell with a too-old near-Lionel Barrymore makeup! But it's still a credit to a small company, a well-done thriller with much stronger story values than usual, and worthy (in these days of relaxed censorship) of a more ambitious remake. With a less emphatic score. -- MKS --