ARCHIVE NIGHT: British films: Stage to Screen

One of the most rewarding lesser echelons of British cinema is that of the essentially British stage show or stage comedy, never intended for more than heme consumption, and transferred to the screen virtually intact in order to catch the limited momentum of the theatrical original's temporary fame. Very few of these unpretentious films were surprisingly outstanding in their own right, even when not they were available records of theatrical shows that would probably never be revived. Happily, tonight's two films fall into both categories. Unless they had a star known in the States - a Jack Buchanan for example - this kind of film rarely made it into a U.S. theatrical release. At best, in the earlier days of television, they might have been included in large packages of small and/or elder independent British films, and even then they were often sparsely shown here, tv stations often ignoring them in favor of films that were action or mystery oriented, or had stars known to U.S. audiences. We hope you'll enjoy discovering these two sprightly films.

OVER SHE GOES (Associated British Picture Corp., 1937) Directed by Graham Catto; a Walter Mycroft Production; Screenplay by Elizabeth Meahan and Hugh Brooke from the play by Stanley Lupino; Camera, Otte Kanturk; Music by Billy Mayerl, lyrics by Desmond Carter and Frank Eyton; Musical Director, Harry Acers; 73 mins.

With: Stanley Lupino (Tommy Teacher); Laddie Cliff (Billy Bowler); Claire Luce (Pamela); Gina Male (Dolly Jordan); Max Baer (Silas Horner); Sally Gray (Kitty); Judy Kelly (Alice Mayhill); John Wood (Lord Harry); Syd Walker (Inap. Giffnook); Richard Murdoch (Sgt. Oliver); Bertha Belmore (Lady Drewsen); and Archibald Betty/Peter Hadden.

"Over She Goes" was the last of a batch of light-hearted Summer holiday releases to hit the British cinemas in August of 1937, being preceded by Rex Harrison's "School for Hasbands", Arthur Tracy's "Command Performance", Jessie Matthews' "Gangway", Frances Day's "The Girls in the Taxi", George Formby's "Keep Fit" and June Knight's "The Lilac Demin", all of them very popular although, the Matthews and Formby films apart, not too much competition for the big Hollywood releases.

"Over She Goes" is totally typical of the kind of frothy stage shows that Lupino Lane, Leslie Henson, Stanley Lupino and Jack Buchanan regularly presented on the London stage, and then transferred to the screen. (Lupino Lane, another member of the Lupino family - Stanley was Ida's father - was cursed by very meagre production values in big films, until the extremely elaborate "The Lambeth Walk" of 1939). Lupino wrote much of his own material, and was usually, partnered, as here, by Laddie Cliff and Sally Gray. His films were surprisingly elaborate and glossy, and presumably were successful or he couldn't have continued to make them. "Reporting Leave" stays in my memory as being the best of them all, but since I haven't seen it since 1936, it could be an unreliable estimate. "Over She Goes" anyway is both typical and a delight: the plot is but the silliest and most artificial peg on which to hang the song numbers, and its treatment is quite unpredictable. Romantic songs arrive on cue, but when detective and police aide suddenly break into a ballet-like frolic, it is quite unexpected. And one song and dance number is done in incredibly long and complicated takes; admittedly, Lupino and Cliff knew the material backwards from their stage version, but one doesn't expect to see such complex cinematography in a relatively minor film. Max Baer again reveals an easy-going acting personality, though his character name of Silas Womer is a bit odd for the brawny and aggressive American that he plays. Possibly in the original stage version more was made of its similarity to Silas Womer, the protagonist of the George Elliot novel, but if so it is excised in the film version. Most of the young ladies involved went on to relative success, though only Sally Gray hit it really big, and then net until the 1960's. Films like this were also an interesting training ground for players better-known on radio. Richard Murdoch, for example, the sergeant, became a major star (adding a comedic "Stinker" to the middle of his name) as Arthur Askey's Tall in the radio show "Bam Wagem", subsequently continuing as Askey's partner in a number of big 40's comedies. He still turns up (often as an aged butcher) on British tv, and in commercials. Syd Walker, the detective, likewise achieved major fame on radio as a Will Regers' type philosopher, spinning tales in the course of his job as a nightwatchman. He made one or two starring films ("I Killed The Count" was one) but never caught on as a star of films. All that really dates - and that only slightly - is the Lupino-Cliff banter, designed to both exploit their personalities and set up the filmsy plot premises. It worked on stage, but since it isn't especially witty, seems doubly artificial on film. Incidentally, for some inexplicable reason the British film censors saw fit to give the movie an "A" certificate, meaning that children under 16 could see it only with an adult. Apart from its flippancy attitude towards marriage, there seems absolutely nothing in the film to justify this, especially as the same month's "Dr. Syn" with George Arliss, which had some quite scary scenes, was released with a "U", meaning that children could see it without any adults escorting them.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

HOME AND AWAY (Eyes Films, 1956) Directed by Vernon Sewell; a Conquest film produced by George Maynard; Screenplay by Sewell, Heather McIntyre and R.P. Delderfield from the play "Trable Trouble" by Heather McIntyre; Camera, Basil Emmett; 81 mins.

With: Jack Warner (George Knowles); Kathleen Harrison (Elis Knowles); Lena Morris (Mary Knowles); Thera Hird (Margie Groves); Charles Victor (Ted Groves); Leslie Henson (Uncle Tom); Valerie White (Mrs Jarvis); Harry Fowler (Syd Jarvis); Morris Carroll (Annie Knowles); Margaret St. Barbe West (Aunt Jean) and Sam Kydd, Bernard Fox.

(continued overleaf)
Regional slapstick comedies, usually made in studios at Manchester and starring such music-hall favorites as Frank Randle and Nat Jackley, were an interesting (if often excruciating) underbelly of British film comedy. Designed primarily for local consumption, they often ran to inordinate length (frequently close to two hours) and got by on their sheer energy and vulgarity — though Frank Randle was a talented (if ill-used) comedian. But regional plays were something else again: many of them established a reputation in the North and then were brought to the West End, and thence to film — but via London studies, not the cruder facilities such as the Mancunian studio in Manchester.

Many of these regional comedies, since they were set in relatively depressed areas (at least as compared to the more prosperous South) revolved around winning the Football Pools — an all-consuming obsession with the British public, whether they were football fans or not. Getting something for nothing, and a chance at luxury and perhaps a new life, was a theme that appealed to the Northerners, but for that matter to all Britons, since conformity and acceptance of bureaucracy and financial austerity has always been a way of life over there. "Home and Away" is something of a companion film to both "The Love Match" (1955, with Arthur Askey and Thora Hird) and Carol Reed's 1938 "Penny Paradise" (with Edward Gwenn). All of these films (and several others) have a vaguely Frank Cappa feel to them, and most of them suggest that money corrupts — clearly catering to the losers in the football pools rather than the runners. "Easy Money" (1947) was a bigger Rank film, a literal equivalent to the American "If I Had a Million," following, in separate stories, the effects (comde, tragi, romantic) on a number of pell's winners.

Since most of these films tend to be somewhat formulaized, it is quite surprising to find what a sprightly and amusing film "Home and Away" is, and how much more it has to offer than just predictable pazzle-fun. Although not so officially, it is rather like a continuation of Britain's only really successful family series, the Haggets. Like Ma and Pa Kettle in "The Egg and I" the Haggets appeared first as important but not lead characters in "Holiday Camp," and then appeared in a trio of not-very-imposing (but popular) follow-ups. They disappeared in 1949 due to diminishing boxoffice returns, and Jack Warner's departure from Rank. Warner and Harrison were the Haggets in all four films, and their co-starring in this film just seven years later had all the appearance of a comeback (bolstered by the presence of Lena Morris, a Rank starlet from the same period) even though the names weren't used.

Jack Warner was perhaps the stereotypical sensible, working-class husband in British films; while it is perhaps a class-prejudicial comment to make, he always seemed too intelligent, wise and imaginative to be contained by his working-class environment, and one always felt that if he weren't restrained by family commitments, he could have gone off and achieved major success in upper stratas of business and social life. Kathleen Harrison, as his wife, was used mainly for comedy and she was an excellent comedienne. But she was also a fine actress and often brought real drama and poignancy to casually written roles (as well as to good ones, as in "Waterfront"). Here there's a real benis in that she is virtually co-starring with a parallel comedienne/actress in Thora Hird, and their team work is superb. Their paths had met before, in such films as "Tom Terrific," but here for the first time they are slugging it out, toe to toe, in roles of equal importance and size. (Harrison reputedly couldn't make up her mind which role suited her best — the wife to Warner role had the advantage of being neo-Haggett and assuring audience response, yet the neighbor role had funnier repartee. Apparently she switched back and forth several times, exasperating the patient Thora Hird who would have been happy with either role, but couldn't go ahead to prepare for it until Harrison made up her mind. The final decision seems to have been the right one, and their team-work is so expert that it's a great pity that they never again shared such opportunities again). Harrison, quite old now, is in retirement; Hird, though bothered with hip and other health problems, is still active, especially on British television, and seems to spring to galvanized life every time the cameras roll! Incidentally, Leslie Hansen (Uncle Tom) was a stage/screen contemporary of Stanley Lupine, appearing in similar shows. This was his last. Director Vernon Sewell was, in a sense, Britain's own Edgar Ulmer. He was a great friend of Michael Powell and did 2nd unit work for him, as well as directing the Powell productions "The Silver Fleet." He was particularly adept at thrillers, horror films and stories of the macabre, and could bring in cheap pictures looking so good that he was, regrettablly for such a versatile director, typed in such films. He made profitable hay out of an early thriller "The Big Sleep," as well as his "Master and directed, often remade, but in different surroundings. "Latin Quarter" (which we've shown) was his most elaborate remake; the small "The Ghost Skip" one of the most ingenious, shot almost entirely on his own yacht! His forays into comedy were rare, which — as proven by "Home and Away" — was a pity. We'll have a little more to say about Sewell in the introductory comments — but please don't ask for an explanation of the Football Pools system in the post-screening discussion.

Program ends approx. 10.28.

William K. Everson
Discussion/Questions session follows.

Post-script: The attention paid to Vernon Sewell reminds me that in the notes for "Over She Goes" we largely ignored director Graham Cutts, whose skill undoubtedly contributed a great deal to making it one of the best Lippine vehicles. A major director in the silent period ("The Rat," "Confetti," "Paddy The Next Best Thing") he had a less notable sound career, but it was a fairly busy one and lasted until 1946. He died in 1950 in his 70's, leaving an actress-daughter and a producer-son to carry on the tradition.