WORLD WAR TWO: Two unusual and unfamiliar films

RESISTING ENEMY INTERROGATION (Army Signal Corps, 1943) 68 mins.
Leading players: The American: Kenneth, Lloyd Nolan, James Saxon, Ben Porter;
The Germans: Carl Esmond, Kent Smith, Peter von Eyck, Hans Schumm, Hans von Trawodski,

During World War Two the prolific output of the Army Signal Corps, designed primarily for training, propaganda and information, included a surprising number of full-length features. Since many of them were done by top Hollywood directors part of their war work had naturally packed in a great deal of Hollywood knowhow and expertise, probably on the theory that the more a given film entertained and held its audience, the greater its training potential. Many of these films, such as John Ford’s feature on the OSS and operating within enemy lines, have never again seen the light of day and remain classified and secret. However, the majority of them were regarded like documents, as of only transient value, and have been destroyed or hurriedly shown and/or destroyed. For this reason, too, many of their credits remain shrouded in mystery. Sometimes it is hard to determine the directorial and other credits; in such cases it has proven very difficult, and inquiries in several directions since we acquired the print about a year ago have been fruitless. However, we’ll keep trying. We can’t even be sure whether this one was made in Astoria, as many of them were. The generally simple sets and constricted space suggest that it probably was; yet the quite remarkable cast (with just about every Hollywood Teuton roped into service!) points conclusively in the direction of West Coast production.

What is surprising about the film is that, even given its hard-sell training function, and the fact that it was never intended to be shown to the public, it is so very entertaining and unreels almost like a tight thriller play. There is a two-fold kind of suspense: one is so intrigued and impressed by German psychological cunning that one is almost rooting for them to get the information they need, and conversely of course one is also rooting for one’s own side. For training purposes, the ingenuity of the Germans is possibly a little over-stated, and the gullibility of the Americans likewise exaggerated; and for morale purposes, the depiction of the Americans as very quickly giving up is (in the context of the time) in a certain way realistic. (Propaganda/training films concerning the Japanese were FAR less respectful!) Even today when we seem to have no enemies other than the IRS (and an Army film telling us how to resist them would be most welcome!) this little film manages to make its points well. The Germanic cast is a delight, though it’s a pity we couldn’t have had Anton Walbrook in the lead instead of his perennial substitute Carl Esmond, though Esmond does manage to switch from charm to menace almost as effortlessly. The musical score is interesting too, in one sequence producing a sting every time the interrogated film-let slip some sensitive information.

― 10 MINUTE INTERMISSION ―

SALUTE JOHN CITIZEN (British National-Anglo American, 1942) Directed by Maurice Elvey;
Produced by Wallace Orton; Screenplay by Clementine Dane and Lizzy Reardon from stories by Robert Greenwood; Camera, James Wilson; 98 mins.
With: Edward Rigby (Mr. Bunting); Stanley Holloway (Czech); George Robey (Corder); Mabel Constans (Mrs. Bunting); Peggy Omnium (Julie Bunting); Dinah Sheridan (Eve); Jimmy Hanley (Ernest Bunting); Eric Micklewood (Chris Bunting); Charles Deane (Bert Rollo); Stewart Rome (Col. Saunders); and June Willock, David Keir, Harry Hallet, Christine Silver, Ian Fleming (Minister of bombed church); Jonathan Field, Gordon Rugg, Valentine Dunn, Harry Fowler, Wally Patch.

“Salute John Citizen” was the 24th British feature of 1942 — and 16 of them had either been all-out war films or at least war-related films (backed up by many short documentaries and wartime information shorts). This time, however, there was much more interest in Hollywood fare. Moreover, “Salute John Citizen” had the misfortune to be a British parallel to “Mrs Miniver” — but to follow it in release. Nobody in England took “Mrs Miniver” seriously and they smiled at its misconceptions — but they also appreciated the sincerity of its tribute. Moreover, it was Hollywood at its best (though forthcoming 50th anniversary celebrations of it may disappoint mightily), won seven Academy awards, was praised by Churchill as a magnificent morale-booster, and was a huge box office success both in the USA and here; it had some powerful set-pieces (the air raid shelter scene) and had the courage to be starkly dramatic when it is depicted. The public loved it, and stayed away from “Salute John Citizen” in droves. (Patriotic and artistic acclaims for revitised British films didn’t arrive until 1943). Even in Canada, the long “Salute John Citizen” was heavily cut, and in the US it had no release at all, so tonight’s showing is a NY premiere. Like “Mrs Miniver”, it’s based on a number of stories nearly reshaped into a single narrative. In detail and milieu it is much more honest than the Hollywood film, even to the extent of one of the lead characters to be a pacifist who is only gradually reconciled to the necessity of fighting — but when it is projected to all around its audience it is a little more “comfortable” and major tragedy seems to avoid the Bunting, rather unlikely for such a large and totally involved family. Stanley Holloway as neighbour/narrator, much like Frank Craven in “Our Town”, talks to the audience and helps to maintain the friendly, low-key flavor. The cast includes music-hall veteran George Robey and newcomer Peggy Omnium; director Elvey is as always uninspired but thoroughly workmanlike — entirely appropriate to such a family and such a theme. It had not been for “Mrs Miniver” that it would have been a bigger commercial success but tonight we can’t expect to see a wartime film as Lauder and Gilliat’s “Millions Like Us”. But it certainly deserves to be better known than it is, and hopefully this nearly 50 years late “premiere” will help.

— William X. Everson ——

Program ends 10.35. Discussion follows. PLEASE NOTE: DEC, 6th (SILENT) PROGRAM WILL TAKE PLACE NOT HERE BUT AT THE NEW SCHOOL’S 5th AVENUE CINEMA LOCATION between 12th & 13th Sts.