A postscript to last week's program. As suspected, my LOVE CAME Back is a remake of a European film, the Austrian EPISODE, written and directed by Walter Reisch, and starring Paula Wessely in the G"urka de Havilland role, though as an art rather than a music student.

THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 69: Program #11
December 20, 1951

Two (very different) British Comedies

TURKEY TIME (Gaumont-British, 1933) Directed by Tom Walls; Produced by Michael Balcon;
Screenplay by Ben Travers from his play; Camera, Charles Van Eiger; Art Director, Alfred Junge; 73 minutes.
With Tom Walls (Max Wheeler); Ralph Lynn (David Winterton); Robertson Hare (Eddie Scotty); Dorothy Hyson (Rose Adair); Mary Brough (Mrs Gather); Norma Varden (Ernestine Scotty); Veronica Rose (Louise Scottt); D.A. Clarke-Smith (Westbourne); Marjorie Corbett (Florence).

Before describing the film itself, or at least attempting to, we have to say something about the actual print — and note how cunningly we turn a liability into an historic artifact. When Gaumont-British entered the non-theatrical field with the non-theatrical talkie in the '30s, they manufactured their own projector which rather perversely had the threading sprockets on the exact opposite side of all other projectors — and they made their prints so that they could only be shown on that projector, which created a reverse image that was straightened out with a mirror lens. You couldn't show their films unless you had their projector ... and if you had their projector, you could only show their films, a fairly monopolistic arrangement. The print of "Turkey Time" is one of those prints. Where else but at the New School could you see such a rarity? Unfortunately, although it's just as suitable (as long) to project at an angle into a mirror which will reflect a corrected image on a screen or wall, the mechanics involved in a projector which will reflect the image would rival the construction of the Eiffel Tower, so we'll settle for a backwards image, actually hardly noticeable since the film is based on a stage play and is all talk. However — of course — it opens with protruded credits which you will be unable to read unless you turn your back on the screen and hold up a small mirror, so we are conveying the gist of those credits here.

The initial title tells us that Christmas Time is Turkey Time, that every British House will have a Christmas turkey, and that the ingredients that go into the pudding. Then the players are introduced and identified with their ingredients and their personality, thusly: Suet and Nuts (Robertson Hare, Norma Varden) ... Sugar (Dorothy Hyson) ... Spice (Veronica Rose) ... Rum (Mary Brough) ... The salt (D.A. Clarke-Smith, the villain) ... Milk (Ralph Lynn) ... and The peel ... a bit tough after 15 years in Montana (Tom Walls). A final title establishes the English seaside town locale, and tells us that the characters are "out for a good time at the end of a damn long day!" Apart from an occasional reverse image portrait of a baldness card or an address on a building, the backward image matters not at all after the credits.

The famous Aldwych farces (written by Ben Travers, and opening at London's Aldwych Theatre) began in the late 20's, and as soon as sound came in, were transferred to the movies. Approximately twenty of them were done between 1930 and 1937, when they began to peter out a little and the major star Tom Walls sought to change his image, although they continued on a less prolific scale through the 40's, with Alfred Drayton and Robertson Hare forming a new team. They are still sturdy (as long) to project at an angle into a mirror, being revived repeatedly but with the kind of reverence accorded to a Noel Coward work, still timely and amusing, and still able to draw attention away from the flimsy plot material. Also, current stars like Edward Hardwicke and Daniel Massey tend to play as individuals rather than as a team, and the revivals, though carefully done and untampered with in terms of text, are often lacking in pace and most especially are lacking in the peisons of the original stars.

It is hard to explain their success either on stage or on film. Basically they are all the same, a very simple situation set up to allow the three stars (backed up by a formidable company of familiar support players, notably Mary Brough as a harridan of a housekeeper and (usually) Winifred Shotter as the heroine). They are never terribly funny and the dialogue not particularly witty, yet the timing is impeccable and the team-work immense. Ralph Lynn was also given to very funny and unpredictable ad libs. In London audiences wanted to like them, always knew exactly what to expect, and greeted them with gales of laughter — both on stage and on screen, through Tom Walls' magic touch, and also bored easily. By the time the property got to the screen he was already tired of it, and either wanted to get drunk or go to the races (he was a great horse fancier) or both. Skilled direction might have turned some of these films into little gems. For obvious reasons, almost none of them got American releases (rough dialogue, and sexual innuendo and occasional omitting racial slurs would have caused trouble even if they had) and when one was included in the Museum of Modern Art's British cycle (admittedly, one of the lesser ones) it clearly bemused audiences. It's difficult to know in advance how well these farces "travel" — they depend a great deal on audience mood, and sometimes catch on surprisingly well. Even in this country, if the audience is on fire, it's still interesting as a record of a major place of British theatrical history, and as a slice of life at the most unexpected times, and there's a near surreal insanity to some of it — such as the party of Christmas carolers monotonously repeating the same single carol. This was Gaumont's big Christmas release of 1933 (with "The Constant Nymph" and "Aunt Sally" not far behind) and we're glad to make it our Christmas offering as a New York premiere some 58 years late. And if it doesn't work for you, there's consolation in the wittier and more comprehensible (though still somewhat British) "Winter Test" which follows. And if it does work, there are others we can follow up with (with the added advantage of being available in 35mm). Tom Walls, Ralph Lynn and Robertson Hare are all gone now, though Hare stayed in harness, both in films and on stage, until in his 80's. Walls went from being a British Grouch Marx to an interim period as a pseudo William Powell in a handful of comedy-thrillers, and wound up as a surprisingly good — continued overleaf —
character actor in films of the 40's, several of which ("Johnny Frenchman", "Spring in Park Lane" and "Love Story") we have shown here.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

THE FINAL TEST (ACT Films-General Film Distributors, 1953) Directed by Anthony Asquith; Screenplay by Terence Rattigan from his TV play; Produced by R.J. Minney; Camera, Bill MacLeod; 91 mins. (Our print is of this full version, not the edited US release) With: Jack Warner (Sam Palmer); Robert Morley (Alexander Whitehead); Brenda Bruce (Cora); Ray Jackson (Reggie Palmer); George Relph (Syd Thompson); Adrienne Allen (Aunt Ethel); Stanley Mxted (Senator); Joan Swan (Miss Fanshawe); Richard Webbe (Frank Weller); Valentine Dyall ("The Man in Black" - star of the tv play); Richard Wattis (tennis spectator) and cricketers Len Hutton, Denis Compton, Alec Bedser, Godfrey Evans, Jim Laker, Cyril Washbrook.

Although "The Final Test" did get a U.S. release, it was somewhat edited and in any case disappeared very quickly, so it is virtually unknown here. Rattigan's first play "French Without Tears" was brought to the screen by Asquith in 1939, and thereafter he brought most of his major works to the screen. They collaborated on some nine films, all generally more successful than the handful of films that Rattigan made with other directors. Rattigan's major value perhaps was as a chronicler of the war years on stage and screen, and if "The Final Test" is one of his lighter works, it still shares the common denominator with all of his plays as being a kind of emotional as well as historical barometer of its time. Although "The Final Test" plays well outside of its particular context, it is still very much a film about attitudes of the 50's. The class-conscious attitudes that were slipping back rapidly after the war supposedly dispensed with then can be seen too clearly as the character of the barmad, who, although she is Jack Warner's romantic vix-en, is given speech patterns which establish her as Warner's inferior. And Warner, in his turn, while given a somewhat condescending moral superiority to her, is also stressed as an intellectual inferior to writers and artists. That his son is rebelling against him (politely) is an indication that the role of the father as undisputed head of the household was definitely waning after the war. The Americans, once treated sarcastically, are now treated more genially. And television, considered a major enemy of the movies in the early 50's, is marvellingly lampooned ... though not without some justification. The arty play that is depicted is really hardly an exaggeration of the kind of thing that the BBC got up to in those days, and still does! The climactic car chase through suburban London is a nostalgic delight today, since so much of it has changed - although geographically it is all over the place. And how the often-referred-to prices have changed too -- the single pound note that Ray Jackson takes to get him to Maidenhead and back would cost ten times that much today (eleven times as much after January lst., when the fares go up again!)

But while it's invaluable as an (unintended) reflection of Britain in the 50's, it's much more important that "The Final Test" works so well on its own level as a comedy with undertones of controlled sentiment. Much of it is quite moving, but almost all of the film's subtler moments are forgotten (and not to the film's disadvantage) when Robert Morley takes over with a bravura, larger-than-life comic performance that is one of the most amusing things he's ever done. His brief description of why cricket is a joy just because it is dull is not only hilarious but also right on target in terms of accuracy too. Incidentally a number of Britain's top cricketers appear as themselves without - quite rightly - causing any real excitement. By the way, the normally reliable Leonard Maltin has two mistakes in his one-line synopsis of the film in his 1992 "Movie and Video Guide"... three really since he applies the adjective "charming" to the wrong player! (A fourth mistake might be that it doesn't seem to be on tv or video anyway!)

----- William K. Everson

Program ends 10:30 approx.
Discussion session follows; Spring schedules are available this evening.

Have a good Christmas break. Filmic goodies backlogged to help make 1992 a good year include Michael Powell's 1956 thriller "The Man Behind the Mask".

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