THE SECRET OF THE LOCH (Wyndham Production—Associated British Film Distributors, 1934)
Directed by Milton Rosner; Produced by Bray Wyndham; Screenplay by Charles Bennett and Hille Briston; Camera: Frederick Porter; Technical and Art Director: J. Elder Mills; Music: Peter Mendosa; Editor: David Lean. 75 mins.

With: Seymour Hicks (Professor Haggie); Nancy O’Neill (Angelie Haggie); Gibson Gowland (Angus) Frederik Peckley (Jimmy Andrews); Eric Hales (Oliver); Ben Field (photographer); Rosamund John (Naggle); Hubert Harben (Professor Fothergill); Stafford Hilliard (Macdonald) and Robb Milton, John Jameson, Elsa Reid.

The Loch Ness Monster has always been news, especially in England. Recent (restrained) reports of renewed sightings even caused one of the American supermarket tabloids to claim a month or two back that he had best be captured. The following week it followed up with a story that it was pregnant, so presumably there have to be at least two monsters in the loch. Curiously, this remarkable story escaped attention by other newspapers, including those in Scotland, so presumably it can be taken with a pinch of haggis.

Nevertheless, the British and particularly the Scots are firm in their belief in Nessie, as he/she/it is affectionately called at home. This film was made in 1934, after a raft of sightings seemed to make confirmed discovery almost a certainty, and it was specially designed to cash in on the current Hollywood horror cycle. Unlike 1933’s “The Ghoul” with Karloff, which went all-out to match Hollywood horror, “The Secret of the Loch” is so restrained that it received a "M" certificate from the censors, the equivalent of the "G" over here. This is typical of the lack of consistency in British censorship, since while it is certainly not a horrifying film, it does have moments of real tension, and very often the theme alone was enough to get the "M" (adult) rating in England, a rating often given to animated cartoons, two-reel comedies, and films that had a share of rare footage of violence. Like so many early Ealing productions (technically it is an independent film, but it was made at Ealing with Ealing facilities) it is lacking in polish and the sound recording is on the harsh side, but it was never released in this country and it is certainly an interesting enough production to warrant a revival when embraced by the “Archive Night” warning. Although presumably trying to cash in on “King Kong,” its more obvious influence is from the silent “The Lost World.” The fact the whole opening seems carefully patterned on the film, with Seymour Hicks paralleling Wallace Beery’s Professor Challenger in trying to persuade the scientific world of his belief in the monster. Also, the climax does not emulate “The Lost World” by having the monster emerge from the lake to devastate Glasgow, or at least Pitlochry, and stages everything underfoot via a technique predating that used by Hal Roach in “One Million B.C.”. At the time, compared with Hollywood expertise, this must have seemed rather tame stuff; today, inundated with special effects in new movies, we obviously don’t expect too much from a nearly sixty-year-old British independent, and are not as likely to be disappointed. For all that, there are merits to the film, not least the very accomplished art direction; some of the interior sets (and camera work, even if mistimed) are well done. One of the work of Charles Hall for James Whale at Universal. Basically what the film lacks apart from spectacle is a charismatic cast. Seymour Hicks is an excellent actor, but somewhat miscast here. The hero is a typically uninteresting British “EM” leading man, and Gibson Gowland (Nicolaeig in Ströheim’s “Greed”) is wasted, or at least mis-used, in a role that calls for him to be both potential menace and comedy relief, but doesn’t give him the material to do either effectively. To its credit, the film did go outside the independent market to acquire the services of the efficient actor/director Milton Rosner as its director.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

THE SHOW GOES ON (Associated Talking Figures—A.F.D. release, 1937) Directed, Produced and original script by Basil Dean; Screenplay, Austin Melford and Anthony Kimmins; Camera, Jan Stavlich; Musical Director, Ernest Irving; 93 mins.

With: Gracie Fields (Sally Scoworth); Owen Nares (Martin Fraser); John Stuart (Jock); Horace Hodges (Sam Bishop); Edward Rigby (Mr. Scoworth); Amy Veness (Mrs Scoworth); Cyril Ritchard (Jimmy); Arthur Sinclair (Mike O’Hara); Jack Hobbs (Nicholson); Dennis Arundell (Felix Flack); Billy Merson (Manager); Frederick Leister (Professor Linton); Patrick Barry (Designer); Nina Vanna (Maniana); and Tom Payne, Lawrence, Percy Maiter, Cyril Randall, Andrea Malandrinos, Fred Hutchings, Queenie Leonard, Isabel Scoaffe, Elsie Wagstaffe, Cyril Grove, Florence Harwood, and Olsen’s Sea Lions.

We’ve received many requests for Gracie Fields’ films, and several of the Ealing are available, but they’re a variable batch, all with specific appeals and assets, yet all marred by harsh production values and sound -- especially when compared to her last and best British film, Fox’s “Shipyard Sally”. However, as the last of her eight Ealing films, “The Show Goes On” is certainly the most elaborate and with a surprising spectacular musical finale. It also contains one of the key and best-remembered Fields scenes: singing “Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye” as British troops embark for foreign parts (as they did with great frequency in the 30’s) while the Queen Mary next to the Coronation, the launching of the QJ was the biggest depression antidote of the decade; streams off in the opposite direction for New York, a sequence rife with the emotionalism of the period.

Gracie has two leading men this time, one of them Owen Nares, a stage and screen maestra idol since 1908! Apart from a brief appearance in 1941’s “The Prime Minister”, this was his last film. (He died in 1943, still only 55 years old.)

Program ends app. 10:50. — W.K.Everson —