THE NEW SCHOOL

FILM SERIES 751 Program #8
April 15, 1944

ESPIONAGE: WORLD WARS ONE AND TWO

YELLOW CANARY (RKO Radio, 1943; US release 1944) Produced and Directed by Herbert Wilcox
Screenplay by Miles Malleson and DeWitt Bodeen from an original story by Pamela M. Bower; Musical Score, Clifton Parker; Camera, Max Greene. 84 mins.
With Anne Nagel (Sally Maitland); Richard Greene (Jim Carlick); Luise Rainer (Ma Carlick); Albert Lieven (Jan Carlick); Nova Pilbeam (Betty Maitland); Margaret Rutherford (Mrs Towsester); Claude Rains (Major Pothergill); Patric Curwen (Sir William Maitland); Marjorie Fielding (Lady Maitland); Aubrey Mallaliou (Reynolds); David Horne (Admiral); Franklin Dyall (Captain); George Thorpe (Col. Hargreaves) and John Longden, Gordon McLeod, Hedley Goodall, Wimfred Oughton, Eliot Makeham, Ian Fleming, Valentina Dyall, MacDonald Parke, Gerry Wilmott, Tatiana Lieven, Leslie Dyer.

Obviously no movie audience in wartime Britain was going to believe in even the remote possibility that Anna Ngela could be a traitress and Nazi spy, so that element of suspense and surprise was automatically removed even as it reared its unlikely and unbritish head. Given that however, it's a tight, well-cast, slickly put together thriller, well above the average for that normally rather bland director Herbert Wilcox. Much of the credit must surely go to second-billed American screenwriter DeWitt Bodeen (then working on some of the better Hollywood thrillers, including "Cat People") since co-writer Miles Malleson was basically a tinkerer, a useful man to add dialogue, comedy relief and additional scenes (usually for himself). Some of the tightness may also be due to the American editing, since the film was trimmed for the U.S. release. It's a smooth job, and none of the cutting shows except by implication; a relatively important name, Nova Pilbeam, would certainly not have been allotted the mere support role that she now has, and in the original British cast, Cyril Fletcher appears as himself, implying a comic sketch or a music hall turn. Fletcher (who only really big part in movies was in Ealing's "Nicholas Nickelby" as Mantalini) was a minor British vaudeville and radio comic, possessed of a voice like Richard Haydn, and whose act consisted of reciting "Odd Odes" that he had composed himself. Fletcher is missing from the American prints, doubtless to the relief of American audiences, but to the frustration of renegade British exiles who remember him with affection if nothing more. Incidentally, the film scored one of its biggest laughs in England with the expertly-placed and timed line "Not you Momma, sit down!" delivered by Richard Greene to a villaness near the end. At the time it was one of the hottest catch-phrases on British radio, being uttered at least once weekly by either Ben Lyon or Bebo Daniels on their "Hi Gang!" show. Presumably the credit for that bit of topical repartee can go to Mr. Malleson rather than DeWitt Bodeen. Incidentally, it would have been nice if the erstwhile Queen Victoria could have been re-united with her Prince Albert, Anton Walbrook, for this film. He would have been fine in the Albert Lieven role. But presumably because this was also the year of his finest work (in "Colonel Blimp") and he was up to his neck in war charity work, he would not have been happy about playing a Nazi. A mouth-watering thought though.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

BRITISH AGENT (Warner Brothers-First National, 1934) Directed by Michael Curtiz; Supervised by Henry Blanke; Screenplay by Laird Doyle, with additional (British) dialogue by Roland Fertwee, from the 1932 novel of the same name by R.H. Bruce Lockhart; George, Eyvane Halley; Art Director, Anton Grot; Technical advisor, Nicholas Koblansky; 81 mins. With: Leslie Howard (Stephen Locke); Kay Francis (Clara Morris); William Gargan (Bob Medill); Phillip Reed (LaFarge); Irving Pichel (Sergei Pavlov); Ivan Simpson (Evans); Halliwell Hobbes (Sir Walter Carrister); J. Carroll Naish (Trotsky); Walter Byeon (Stanley); Cecil Romeo (Tito); Arthur Aylesworth (Henry Farver); Alphonse Ethier (Paul); Tenen Holtz (Lenin); Doris Lloyd (Lady Carrister); Mary Forbes (Lady Trehearme); Marina Schubert (Maria Nikolaeva); Frank Reicher (Mr.X); George Pearce (Lloyd George); Gregory Gaye (Kolchino); Paul Forcasi (Count Romano); Addison Richards (Cubinoff); Olaf Hytten (Under-secretary); Zosia Tanina (Dora Kaplan Josif Mario (Stalin); Norman Stengel (Radek); Georgia Cooper (Mrs Farmer); Donald Crisp (O'Neill); Frank Lockteer (suspect); Montague Shaw (diplomat) and Harry Semels, Claire McDowell.

It's interesting that this film was initially intended for Frank Borzage, but then turned over to Michael Curtiz, making it a literal parallel to his much later "Mission to Moscow". (Jack Warner had also approached the Soviet government regarding shooting in Moscow, but the request was either denied or ignored). It was obviously intended as a big, splashy prestige adaptation of the novel by Bruce Lockhart (who had been imprisoned following the assassination attempt on Lenin) but what emerges is a big, splashy adventure yarn, obviously much influenced by the staging and editing of Eisenstein's "October". It is very entertaining in a manner probably not intended, but leaves more than a slightly bad taste in the mouth as it seemingly amlauad the efforts of foreign diplomats to interfere in and re-direct the policies of one country for the selfish and/or political needs of their own. Not that it didn't go on, but it would have been refreshing to have seen it tackled in a critical vein, not a near-swashbuckley one. However, that's probably why the film has a minor reputation and is rarely shown! Certainly an ambitious production, it is a thoroughly fascinating one too, if not as uplifting as Warners might have hoped.

--- William K. Everson ---

Program ends app. 10.35; Discussion follows.