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RED ENSIGN
CROWN V. STEVENS

MICHAEL POWELL

and

POWELL & PRESSBURGER

November 20, 1980 - January 5, 1981

Monday, November 24 (2:30)

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Two films: RED ENSIGN and CROWN V. STEVENS

RED ENSIGN. 1934. Great Britain. Michael Powell. Produced by Jerome Jackson for Gaumont British. Screenplay: Michael Powell and Jerome Jackson. Additional dialogue: L. du Garde Peach. Photography: Leslie Rowson. Supervising Art Director: Alfred Junge. 69 minutes.

With: Leslie Banks (David Barr), Carol Goodner (June MacKinnon), Frank Vosper (Lord Dean), Alfred Drayton (Manning), Donald Calthrop (MacLeod), Allan Jeayes (Emerson), Campbell Gullan (Hannay), Percy Parson (Casey), Fewlass Llewlyn (Sir Gregory), Henry Oscar (Raglan), and George Carney, John Laurie, Jack Lambert, Jack Raine.

CROWN V. STEVENS. 1936. Great Britain. Michael Powell. Executive Producer: Irving Asher for Warner Brothers-First National. Screenplay: Brock Williams, based on the novel "Third Time Unlucky" by Laurence Maynell. Photography: Basil Emmott. Editor: Bert Bates.

With: Beatrix Thomson (Doris Stevens) Patric Knowles (Chris Jansen), Reginald Purdell (Alf), Glennis Lorimer (Molly), Allan Jeayes (Inspector Carter), Frederick Piper (Arthur Stevens), Googie Withers (Ella), Mabel Poulton (Mamie), Morris Harvey (Julius Bayleck), Billy Watts (Joe Andrews), Davina Craig (Maggie), Bernard Miles (Detective).

Michael Powell made no less than fourteen features in his first four years as a director, most of them melodramas or simple comedies. The bulk of them were definitely quota quickies (a term explained more fully in other notes for this series) with running times in the area of 45 minutes. THE RED ENSIGN is the twelfth film in this group, and the first known to be still extant.

Although a film of lesser commercial importance, THE RED ENSIGN was still several notches above "quickie" status. The depression and its unemployment resulted in a number of British films dealing with the gloom of inactivity in the Northern shipbuilding and textile industries. Some of them, such as Gracie Fields' SING AS WE GO generated a rather false (if welcome) optimism. THE RED ENSIGN, however, tells its story within the framework of subdued melodrama, and thus its upbeat ending seems somewhat less contrived. However, honesty doesn't necessarily work better than showmanship, and it must be admitted that the film's good intentions don't altogether come off. A potential romantic subplot is virtually suppressed, and without the topicality of its time, the ultimate denouement is a little anti-climactic. Quite incidentally, the film was loosely remade in 1943 under the title THE SHIPBUILDERS.

Production stills of the film show considerable ingenuity on the part of Powell and his crew in contriving studio-type equipment from the primitive materials on hand for the shipyard location sequences--including a camera crane rigged up from

a dockside crane, boards and scaffold-tubing. The results can be seen in smooth tracking shots over the heads of dockyard crowds, such professionalism helping to camouflage the occasional use of newsreel footage and intercut studio sets.

* * *

CROWN VERSUS STEVENS is a much less ambitious product though in many ways a better one. Although Warner Brothers were unusually conscientious in their obligatory British films, still a kind of filmic class distinction was employed. Some films, by virtue of plots and the utilisation of American directors and/or stars, were thought to have qualities which would enable them to play top of the bill at smaller British theaters, and also to be offered in U.S. release through the parent company. (Films like William Beaudine's MR. COHEN TAKES A WALK or Monty Banks' THE CHURCH MOUSE fall into this category). Others, and a running-time not exceeding six reels was usually the tip-off, were intended only for unambitious home consumption, and CROWN VERSUS STEVENS falls into this category. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how Warners in England had copied their Hollywood system of efficient, professional, assembly-line production. The sets here are either small and cramped, or revamped from bigger sets employed on other films. But they have a solid and atmospheric look to them, and excellent lighting and camerawork makes them look far more expensive than they must have been.

A comparison in this film with LAZY BONES (made by a wholly British independent company) will emphasize how great a disparity there could be even within the ranks of the quickies, and how much Hollywood know-how, and even slightly upped budgets, could benefit the end result.

As with SOMETHING ALWAYS HAPPENS there's the suggestion of input from Warners' Hollywood story properties. Added to the British story-line are incidents and characters borrowed from the Davis-Muni BORDER TOWN. Beatrix Thompson even lights and smokes cigarettes in the approved Bette Davis manner, indicating that she at least knew where the inspiration was coming from. It's an interesting example too of the Warner ability to transpose high-powered Hollywood material into a far more subdued British suburban milieu. One can hardly imagine a Warner Hollywood hero of 1936 being worried about his entire future because of a \$100 debt--but that amount to a low-salaried British worker of the 30's would indeed be a matter for concern.

Incidentally, one wonders whether or not the film was shot in relative sequence. Patric Knowles seems singularly ill at ease and not even well made-up in his first scene, yet almost immediately thereafter becomes very self-assured. Having watched Powell coax and build performances from non-professionals in his recent student production at Dartmouth, one suspects his hand in this rapid transformation! Knowles followed another Warner-British player, Errol Flynn, to Hollywood shortly after this film, and the same year as playing his younger brother in THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE. And if Glennis Lorimer (the young actress who plays Molly) seems frustratingly familiar, it's probably because she was also the graceful lady who bowed to the audience in the old Gainsborough trademark so familiar in the 30's.

-- © William K. Everson

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Suggested reading: "Powell Pressburger and Others," edited by Ian Christie (British Film Institute, London, 1978). Available in MoMA Bookstore.