

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Rare British films on view at the Stanford

STANFORD THEATRE FESTIVAL BEGINS TONIGHT

By Richard Scheinin Mercury News

Article Launched: 09/17/2008 05:48:54 PM PDT

David W. Packard, an heir to the Hewlett-Packard fortune, is famously fond of old movies and old movie palaces. He re-oxygenates out-of-circulation films and gets them out of the archives and onto the screen, especially at Palo Alto's Stanford Theatre, which he renovated nearly 20 years ago, making it a mecca for vintage cinema.

"Rare Treasures of British Cinema," the festival opening tonight and continuing through Oct. 31 at the Stanford, includes films unseen in the United States since the 1940s. Yet some were mega-hits in Britain during the war years: escapist melodramas with unlikely plot twists and marquee names in leading roles, including James Mason and Margaret Lockwood.

"The idea of running a festival consisting entirely of films that I had never heard of" was an appealing one for Packard especially, he says, since he wound up falling for so many films in the trove.

The story began in 2005, when Packard learned that a collection of about 400 films — including 200 or so British prints of pristine quality — was being offered for sale by a New York film archival group, Gartenberg Media Enterprises. Packard investigated and arranged last year for the Stanford Theatre Foundation, which he runs, to purchase the prints for a little less than \$500,000.

Earlier this year, he culled about 30 of the British

films and began screening them with Cyndi Mortensen, the Stanford Theatre Foundation's manager. They were especially taken with films made by Gainsborough Pictures. The British studio successfully targeted mid-century female audiences with stories of female independence — a theme that resonated at wartime, with men on the battlefield and so many women suddenly on their own.

"The Wicked Lady" (Sept. 27-28), stars Lockwood as a nobleman's wife — "a psychotic Scarlett O'Hara," Mortensen says — who turns to highway robbery. (Mason is her lover). A smash for Gainsborough in 1945, the film was the "Titanic" of its time.

Well known for her role in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Lady Vanishes," Lockwood also stars in "Bank Holiday" (1938), tonight's festival opener. It's on a double bill with "Rome Express" (1932), a train thriller par excellence.

But the biggest discovery for Packard and Mortensen is actress Patricia Roc, star of "The Brothers" (1947, showing Oct. 11-12), filmed by Gainsborough on the Isle of Skye. "She is a force of nature," Mortensen says, calling the film "a major find. It's just beautifully filmed, a really good story, and has the most insane twist of an ending, which just left me hanging with my mouth open, like, 'Huh?'"

The theater is at 221 University Ave., Palo Alto. Information: (650) 324-3700 or www.stanfordtheatre.org.

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