

the *British Film Institute* presents

"QUOTA QUICKIES"

THE BIRTH OF THE BRITISH 'B' FILM



Steve Chibnall

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: The Cuckoos in the Nest viii

1 Protective Measures: The Quota Act 1

2 The Pound-a-foot Merchants 18

3 Mere Footage?: Criticising the Quickie 64

4 Quota Entertainments 92

5 Cuts to the Quickies 138

6 Also Showing 152

7 Case Study: Film Exhibition 185

8 Case Study: Film-making 207

9 The Quickie and the Dead: Casualties of the Second Quota Act 232

Conclusion: The Pointing Finger 249

Filmography: British Supporting/Second Features 1928–39 257

Index 303

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This book is dedicated to the man who put my home town, Bedford, on the film-making map, the Crown Prince of the Quota: Widgy Raphael Newman (1900–1944).

Widgy Newman

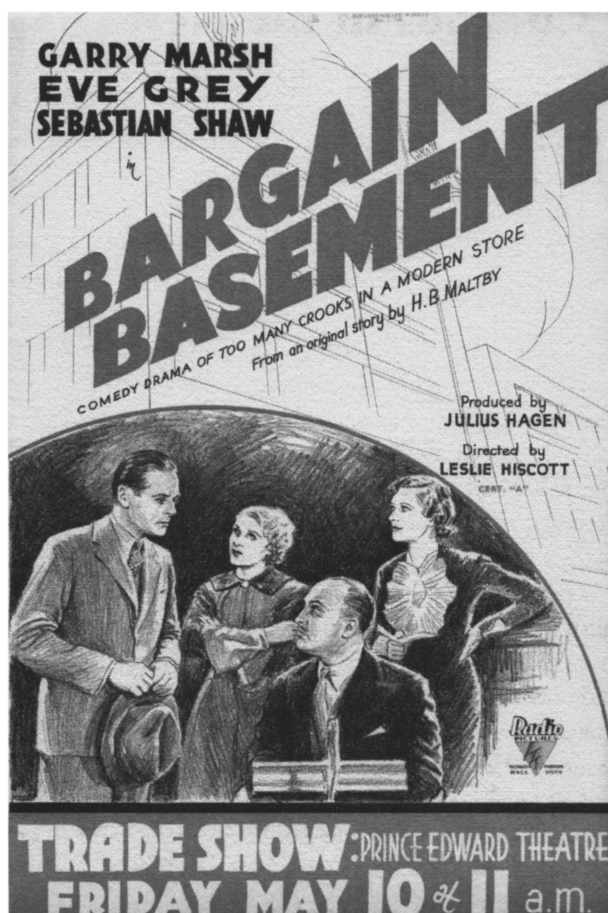
Introduction: The Cuckoos in the Nest

Between 1933 and 1939, I directed no less than twenty-four pictures. And weren't they awful! With one or two exceptions. My punishment is that now, in my New York apartment, when I switch on my TV set, occasionally one of those dreadful abortions will float up out of its celluloid grave on to the screen.

Reginald Denham¹

In autumn of 1935, a modest little British film, directed by the long-forgotten Leslie Hiscott, secured an extraordinary seven bookings in the provincial city of Leicester. The sixty-six-minute picture, made at Twickenham Studios and distributed by the American company Radio Pictures (RKO), was a conventional drama of mistaken identity set in a department store, and was not particularly distinguished or critically praised. The trade paper *Today's Cinema* summed it up as 'Moderate direction, adequate portrayal [. . .] for unexacting patrons.'² The cinemagoers of Leicester were apparently unexacting enough to tolerate its screening, in two venues, as a co-feature. The film was called *Bargain Basement*, and the title could have been a generic one for the hundreds of cheap and usually cheerful pictures that could be picked up by exhibitors to fill the bottom half of their double bills. They were not expensive and nobody expected a masterpiece, but they served a purpose and they passed the time. Of course, their own time is now passed, most are lost and almost all are forgotten. It would be easy – some might say kindest – to let them lie in those celluloid graves, but no cultural historian should be content to let the half-truths told about them go unchallenged.

Pictures like *Bargain Basement* came to be referred to as 'quota quickies' because they were speedily turned out to allow distributors and exhibitors to conform to the legal requirements of the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act. This protective legislation introduced a minimum quota of British films that distributors were obliged to offer and cinemas were expected to screen. The vast majority of these inexpensive productions were shown as supporting features, often with a Hollywood film as the main attraction, and were almost exclusively for domestic consumption rather than export. This pattern of production, distribution and exhibition was the unintended consequence of the so-called 'Quota' Act, which had ambitiously sought to stimulate the making of British pictures that might compete with Hollywood's best and promote imperial interests overseas. While the native film industry did succeed in producing many pictures of which the nation was proud, the quota quickies became a national disgrace, and their elimination a challenge for law reformers.



Cheap products: the title of Leslie Hiscott's quota quickie could not have been more appropriate. Trade advertisement for *Bargain Basement*. Author's collection

In his influential book on British cinema in the 1930s *The Age of the Dream Palace*, cultural historian Jeffrey Richards described the quota quickies unequivocally as 'a truly awful flood of cinematic rubbish'.³ Veteran director and cinematographer, Ronald Neame, who worked on supporting features at Fox-British in the 1930s is equally dismissive: 'Quota quickies were bad films, and therefore bad for our industry.'⁴ For the distinguished producer Michael Balcon, these cheap and tawdry pictures sullied the reputation of the entire national cinema: 'For many people "a British film" became the rubbishy second feature you had to sit through, or avoid, if you went to see a Hollywood picture.'⁵ These commentators were doing little more than articulating a widespread opinion within the film trade and beyond. A contemporary Memorandum from the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA) asserted that the British quota quickie was 'probably worse than the worst foreign film', and that its only competitors have been some Empire-made pictures 'which happen to qualify as British films'. It was in the 'public interest', said the CEA, that 'production of this type should be eliminated'.⁶ Fifteen years later, the Political and Economic Planning (PEP) report, *The British Film Industry* described the quickies as 'a series of cheap films which had little or no entertainment value even for the meanest taste', adding that

the 'disheartening effects on the actors and the technicians of producing such films can be imagined, and must largely have offset any satisfaction at being in employment at all'.⁷

The quota quickies were the shame of the nation, and apparently did lasting harm. The 1952 PEP report even feared that 'it is possible that even after many years of an infinitely higher standard of national film the opprobrium which the "quota quickie" earned may still affect the preferences of British audiences'.⁸ It seems that, if ever there were a case of unpatriotic film-making, this was it. As World War II approached, the quota quickies must have appeared to be a cinematic fifth column, diligently engaged in the work of sabotaging the nation's pride in home-produced entertainments. However the blame for this could not be laid on Hitler. A much older enemy was at work: America. The PEP report puts the responsibility for these abominations squarely on the American distribution companies that cynically sponsored their production in order to fulfil legal obligations 'without impairing the competitive advantage of their own product'.⁹ In this and many other accounts, an unmistakable strand of anti-Americanism bars the way to a proper understanding of the conditions that produced and sustained the quota quickie phenomenon. There is no hint here that British companies might have been involved in the production and distribution of quickies, or of the role played by these modest movies in servicing the needs of the popular two-feature cinema programme. There is certainly no suggestion that some might have received good reviews, many hundreds of bookings across the country and positive responses from audiences.

The blame attached to Hollywood companies for sponsoring a sub-industry of substandard film-making in Britain sits uneasily with the credit given to the same studios for making low-budget programmers in the USA. The differences in the treatment given to American 'B' movies and their British equivalents have been striking. The unfavourable comparison of British with American second features can be traced back to the contemporary judgment of the leftist *World Film News* in 1937:

For some reason or other the English producer has decided that English audiences dislike any sort of realism, while the American producer concentrates on drawing his characterization, if not his situations, from life. The English second feature is practically always upper class. If it is a comedy, it is peopled with grotesque characters with whose facetious horseplay one is meant to maintain sympathy. Members of the aristocracy are presented with the intelligence of apes and a far lower moral standard. Their sense of humour finds an outlet in tiresome horseplay reminiscent of the dormitory rag. The mirthful *piece de resistance* is the spectacle of the hero dressing up as a woman. These characters do not live and are not meant to live. . . . The American second feature usually draws its characters from life. They are human beings, not pegs for 'funny dialogue'.¹⁰

In more recent years, the products of the 'B' units in Hollywood, the Poverty Row studios like Monogram and Republic, and independent merchants of exploitation cinema in the 1930s have generated waves of warm nostalgia, while a stream of fan magazines and scholarly works have analysed their texts, interviewed their makers, and celebrated their cultural value as expressions of vernacular taste and commercial inventiveness. In contrast, there is an almost uncanny silence around their British equivalents. Annette Kuhn's study of the popular memory of cinema in the 1930s gives no clue that the hundreds of indigenous second features of the era were ever part

of the programme of entertainment.¹¹ It is as if they have been erased from history. The National Film Archive has preserved no posters and barely 5 per cent of the films themselves. There have been no fanzines dedicated to their memory and the only mentions in standard histories of British cinema have been pejorative.

Whereas historical work on American 'B' pictures dates back to the late 1960s and the prolific output of enthusiast Alan Barbour, the quota quickie barely surfaced in British film historiography until twenty years later. First, BFI employee Linda Wood decided to adopt low-budget British pictures of the 1930s as the subject of her M. Phil. thesis at the Polytechnic of Central London, and then, a few years later, Lawrence Napper picked a similar topic for his MA thesis at the University of East Anglia.¹² Napper's work can now be seen as part of a revisionist research project instigated at the same university in the mid-1980s, when Charles Barr commissioned articles for his edited collection *All Our Yesterdays*. The contribution from Robert Murphy had contained only a single page on the second features of the 1930s, but that was still a breakthrough at that time.¹³ Paradoxically, the continuing neglected status of the quota quickies is evidenced by their prominence in Jeffrey Richards' indicatively titled collection *The Unknown 1930s*.¹⁴ Napper has ascribed this neglect to a tradition of critical thought that has been 'unable to accommodate specifically British films in a meaningful way'.¹⁵ However, I am more inclined to the idea that the hundreds of cheap 'knock-offs', which constituted half of the films made in Britain in the decade before World War II, have been difficult to reconcile with the prevailing definitions of a national cinema of quality enshrined in film culture after the end of those hostilities. Within this paradigm, the quota quickies must either be ignored as regrettable anomalies, or grudgingly acknowledged when they clearly constitute preparatory work by film-makers and actors who went on to produce quality work. When we view the examples of 1930s' low-budget production that have survived, there is usually little doubt that they are culturally 'specifically British' (usually specifically English), but they have always had one vital characteristic that has allowed them to be disowned by the guardians of a thoroughbred national cinema: most were made or commissioned and distributed by American companies. Thus, they can be denounced as – to use Anthony Asquith's phrase – 'cuckoo films', deposited illegitimately in the nest of British cinema.¹⁶ The problem with such a dismissive nomenclature, however, is that it ignores the awkward fact that they were made overwhelmingly by Britons for domestic audiences.

If Asquith had been writing in a less genteel age, he might have conceptualised these pictures as 'bastard films', the progeny of an illicit liaison between American capital and English labour. The idea would have suited the moral climate of a time when children born out of wedlock were not talked about and only reluctantly acknowledged, but again it does not fit the facts. The quota quickie cannot be so easily disinherited and denied. It was the offspring of a shotgun marriage: the father of the bride was the British legislature, and no dowry was forthcoming. The offspring may have been under-socialised and may have exhibited symptoms of disability, but its legitimacy was without question. It must be treated as part of the lineage of British popular film.

It will, no doubt, be objected that the quickie was never popular, that it was merely tolerated until it could be eliminated. Perhaps, but this begs an empirical question. Any attempt to quantify the popularity of 'B' pictures is made difficult by the very status of these films as supporting features. Consequently, they have not been considered in surveys of cinema attendance,

such as Julian Poole's work on the *Majestic*, Macclesfield.¹⁷ In fact there is no indication in Poole's statistics that any supporting features were shown, although some must have been. Similarly, the otherwise meticulous measuring of audience preferences in the 1930s by John Sedgwick largely ignores the significance of the supporting feature, which might have been a factor for filmgoers when choosing among competing programmes.¹⁸

Definitions

So far, the terms 'quota quickie', 'second feature' and 'supporting feature' have been used interchangeably. However, they are really overlapping categories, the first referring to a mode of production, the others to a mode of exhibition. 'Quota quickie' was a term used in the 1930s to describe a picture made in less than four weeks, at a cost of approximately £1 per foot of film, with the primary purpose of discharging the legal obligations (under the Quota Act) of American rental companies. The term might also be extended to films handled by British renters, but made under similar budgetary regimes. Less pejoratively, the term 'quota films' was also used to distinguish low-budget British production from indigenous films that might be expected to compete with Hollywood movies as major box-office attractions. Quota films served the needs of exhibitors with a clientele that was typically local, regular, female, older and more conscious of value-for-money than the patrons of the large circuit houses. While a few enjoyed screenings at pre-release and large circuit cinemas, these were films that generally only entered the cascade system of distribution described by John Sedgwick at its lower levels, with the second- and third-run cinemas.¹⁹

The 'second' or 'supporting' feature is a more slippery beast. The twin appellations 'second feature' or 'supporting feature' may be used synonymously to describe the subordinate positioning of a film within a two-feature cinema programme, a placing which, in spite of the manipulations of distributors, was ultimately subject to the judgment of individual exhibitors. Therefore, all but the most lavish productions of the 1930s might suffer the indignity of support billing at some stage in their distribution, at home or abroad. In practice, however, there usually existed a working consensus that allowed most films to be classified as either a first, second, or co-feature (i.e. a film that was to be given an equal billing with an equivalent attraction on the cinema bill). But such classifications were often provisional and subject to revision in the light of actual exhibition experience or predicted audience response in a given area.

Unlike the quota quickie, the second feature was not defined simply by budget or production schedule: George Formby's first film *Boots! Boots!* (1934) was made at Albany Studios, reputedly for only £3,000, but played as an eighty-minute feature attraction until it was edited for its second run as a supporting feature, first to seventy minutes and then to fifty-seven in 1936. The film is thought to have grossed £30,000, almost three times higher than the average box-office return.²⁰ BIP's smash hit musical revue *Elstree Calling* (1930) was filmed by Adrian Brunel in twelve days and, after additional scenes were added by Hitchcock, it was edited in a further eleven.²¹ Nor was running time always a sure indication of a film's status. Even informed observers of the trade tended to assume that length was the primary indicator of a picture's status, but witnesses called to Lord Moyne's 1936 inquiry into the operation of the Cinematograph Films Act, repeatedly had to correct this misapprehension, insisting that the two films in a programme were often of similar length, and that second-feature status was a judgment of

quality above all else.²² British International Pictures' (BIP's) drama of sailors trapped in a submarine, *Men Like These* (directed by Walter Summers in 1931), clocked in at only three-quarters of an hour, but struck such a patriotic chord that it became a major attraction.²³ When the dashing, young bearded wonder Bernard Vorhaus directed his first film for United Artists in 1933, he thought he was making a supporting feature, but the appropriately titled *Money for Speed* (1933) was so dynamic that it frequently zipped into top billing – with no additional remuneration for its director.²⁴ BIP's crime thriller *The House Opposite* (1932) was thought by *Kinematograph Weekly* to be a 'fair, average supporting offering', but the popularity of its star, Henry Kendall, and its exciting climax in a blazing house, enabled it to play exclusively as a first feature in Leicester.²⁵ John Baxter's *Lest We Forget* (1934) was also made as a second feature, but was elevated to the top of the bill by many cinemas.²⁶

The dividing line between first and second features was often thin. Films costing a little above the standard pound-a-foot but under £10,000 might fall either side of that line. Their status depended on the quality of the final cut, the trade reviews received and the prestige of the booking exhibitor. Sometimes these considerations could be contradictory: *Alibi*, Twickenham's 1931 adaptation of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, was recommended in *The Bioscope* as a 'Good second feature offering', but was evidently intended by its distributors, W&F, as a 'super' production – which is how it was featured at London's Capitol Cinema and probably how most provincial bookers regarded it.²⁷ Conversely, there were a significant number of supporting features that once had loftier ambitions. One example was the disappointing *The House of the Spaniard* (1936). Made at Ealing with relatively high production values, reasonable notices and distributed by Associated British, it failed to inspire exhibitors and sank to second-feature status.²⁸ Sometimes the reaction of the Hollywood-hungry audiences in London's West End could sink the prospects of a British picture. For instance, when Twickenham made *Silver Blaze* (1937), they had reason to believe that a Sherlock Holmes story was a box-office banker, especially as Arthur Wontner in the role of Conan Doyle's sleuth had a good track record.²⁹ However, when Thomas Bentley's modern dress adaptation premiered at the Regal, Marble Arch, the youthful audience treated it as unsophisticated, old-fashioned melodrama, cheering the hero, hissing the villain and chuckling through the serious passages.³⁰ Film industry old-timers might have scratched their heads and agreed with Inspector Lastrade that 'there are things about this case that completely baffle me', but this well-publicised rejection of a proven formula was enough to condemn the film to supporting-feature status, even in less exalted halls than the Regal. Wontner never played Holmes again and the depiction of the great detective was left to Hollywood for the next twenty years. As the president of the CEA put it: 'the film that is made with the best of intentions and does not turn out right still has its uses, and its use is the second feature'.³¹

A failed first feature could expect little respect from provincial exhibitors, and their scissor-happy projectionists might mutilate it to fit their programmes' running times. The aggrieved Association of Cine-Technicians (ACT) cited one case in which a British programmer had been cut by eight minutes by an exhibitor keen to accommodate a short film into his programme. The effect was to eliminate the entire part played by an actress who subsequently found fame in Hollywood. At least she got her screen credit, but the crudeness of this re-editing was evidenced in another case in which the whole of the first reel, including the credit titles, was

junked.³² Presumably there was simply not time to wield the scissors. Some first features were re-cut by their distributors and reissued as supporting features. For example, New Era's stirring naval tale, *Q Ships*, directed by Geoffrey Barkas and Michael Barringer in 1928, was edited down to an accommodating seventy minutes, with sound added for its re-release as *Blockade* in 1932. Curiously, the new version was credited to Hugh Croise.³³ During the production shortage of 1938–9, the Stanley Lupino comedy *Honeymoon for Three* (1935) was cut by twenty minutes to make a sixty-eight-minute supporting feature for Victor Film Distributors.

Some attempt to map this jungle is made in this book's Filmography, by examining what was actually shown as supporting, co- and first features in one city, Leicester (according to the advertisements in the local paper), and then making a series of educated guesses about films that were apparently not exhibited in the city. Although the Filmography is provisional (and even speculative in places), it is at least empirically grounded, and, as the best data set available, has been used as a basis for quantitative projections and the estimation of production and exhibition rates. These, of course, should be treated with caution and regarded as merely indicative. With these explanations and warnings in mind, we can now begin the story of the British second feature by approaching its foundational event: the Quota Act.

Notes

1. Reginald Denham, *Stars in My Hair* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1958), p. 177.
2. *Today's Cinema*, 11 May 1935, p. 4.
3. Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930–1939* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 3.
4. Ronald Neame, *Straight from the Horse's Mouth* (Lanham, MD and Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), p. 35.
5. Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents . . . A Lifetime of British Films* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), p. 28.
6. Cmd. 5320, *Cinematograph Films Act 1927: Report of a Committee Appointed by the Board of Trade*, Memorandum by the CEA, paragraphs 4 and 5.
7. PEP, *The British Film Industry* (London: Political and Economic Planning, 1952), pp. 50, 51.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
10. *World Film News*, May 1937, p. 13.
11. Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
12. Linda Wood, 'Low-budget Film-making in 1930s Britain', unpublished M. Phil. thesis, Polytechnic of Central London, 1989. Lawrence Napper, 'British Scenes and British Humour: "Quota Quickies" in the 1930s', unpublished MA thesis, University of East Anglia, 1994. Articles based on both of these theses were published as (respectively) 'Low-budget Films in the 1930s', and 'A Despicable Tradition? Quota Quickies in the 1930s', in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 1997), pp. 48–57 and 37–47.
13. Robert Murphy, 'Under the Shadow of Hollywood', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays* (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 47–71.
14. Jeffrey Richards (ed.), *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of British Cinema 1929–1939* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998).

15. Napper, 'A Despicable Tradition?'
16. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 April 1939, p. 5.
17. Julian Poole, 'British Cinema Attendance in Wartime: audience preference at the Majestic, Macclesfield, 1939–1946', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol.7 no.1, 1987, pp. 15–34.
18. John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–61.
20. Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1929–1939* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 162.
21. Letter from Brunel to Michael Balcon, 30 July 1937, BFI Special Collections.
22. See, for example, the evidence of F.W. Baker and Captain R. Norton of the British Film Producers Group, Cmd. 5320: 370–1.
23. *Kinematograph Weekly* (12 November 1931, p. 39) accorded it almost unprecedented praise, stating that 'it is doubtful if any finer work of a realistic nature has been achieved' and finding it 'difficult to conjecture what sort of audience it would be that could not be thrilled and fascinated by this epic of courage'.
24. Bernard Vorhaus interview, BECTU Oral History Project, Interview 219, 23 October 1991.
25. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 24 March 1932, p. 27.
26. John Baxter, 'Stepping Stones', unpublished manuscript, BFI Special Collections, p. 18.
27. *The Bioscope*, 20 April 1931, p. 34.
28. It managed a single supporting-feature booking in Leicester, and this more than a year after its trade show.
29. Six years earlier, Wontner had played Holmes in *The Sleeping Cardinal* (1931), a film that was apparently acclaimed in the USA as 'the best British picture yet made'. *Picturegoer*, 1 August 1931, p. 5.
30. *Picturegoer*, 14 August 1937, p. 6.
31. Cmd. 5320: 887.
32. Cmd. 5320: 622.
33. *Q Ships* and *Blockade* press books.

Protective Measures: The Quota Act

There appears to be a misguided opinion about this industry that there is a wish on the part of the producers to make greater and better films. We have not found that. What we have found is the wish to make money in this business.

T. H. Fligelstone, President of the CEA¹

In the years that followed World War I, the once prominent British film industry was progressively displaced by foreign competition. By 1926, when English studios turned out just thirty-seven pictures, British films accounted for less than 5 per cent of screenings in UK cinemas. Stoll and Butcher's, the leading British distributors, could offer only seven indigenous pictures.² When a Joint Trade Committee for British Films, representing producers, distributors and exhibitors, failed to agree a plan to rescue the home industry, the government was obliged to introduce legislation. The resulting Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 is popularly known as the Quota Act because it required that a certain proportion of films distributed and exhibited in Britain had to be British in origin.

Thought of as a protectionist measure to create employment within a hard-pressed industry, the Act also addressed less tangible social and cultural concerns. At home, there were fears about the waywardness of youth and, particularly, the fate of young women (a prominent part of the cinema audience) exposed to the unadulterated influence of Hollywood decadence. Marek Kohn has documented the frequently overt racism and xenophobia among the press and politicians of the period, and the way in which foreign influences were regularly blamed for British social ills.³ Xenophobic and anti-Semitic discourses were given legitimacy by an ultra-conservative Home Secretary, William Joynson-Hicks, who would readily accept the idea that the internationally dominant American film industry was controlled by a cabal of Jews. As far as the British Empire was concerned, fears were expressed at the 1926 Imperial Conference that the Hollywood film, with its attendant ideologies of independence, individualism and consumption, would not only make the colonies and dominions more difficult to govern, but would also undermine the lucrative trade relations with the 'Mother Country'. The imperial lobby, with its belief that 'trade follows the film', provided a vital impetus to the Quota Act.⁴

Thus, the 1927 Act should be seen as an attempt to protect and promote both British economic and cultural interests, at home and abroad. In symbolic terms, the Act opened the gates for the brave St George to venture out to slay the mighty dragon of Hollywood and restore British enlightenment. However, effective propaganda for the British way of life and British political

interests depended on the national cinema attaining a quality of production that would reflect favourably on the country. Unfortunately, the Act failed to provide guarantees of quality, not least because the Board of Trade was loath to accept criteria that were not amenable to simple and unequivocal measurement techniques.

Like all legislation, the 1927 Act was a compromise between competing interest groups. The British producer/renters saw an opportunity to expand both their film-making and their access to desirable American films for distribution. Unsurprisingly, the cartel of American companies that dominated British film distribution was motivated by the desire to maintain its share of an overseas market that had become a vital source of profitability. To this end, they operated the advantageous practices of block and blind (advance) booking, which obliged exhibitors to hire inferior, or as yet unmade, films in order to obtain proven American successes. But, in spite of exploitative contracts, the thousands of British exhibitors who had founded profitable businesses on popular Hollywood product maintained an allegiance to the American companies. The exhibitors, most of whom managed a single picture house or small chain of cinemas, were ambivalent or hostile towards a growth of British films of unproven public appeal.⁵ There were also sceptical voices among the primary group that the Act was designed to help: the established independent British film producers. T. A. Welsh of the Welsh Pearson Company pointed to the way in which quota legislation in Germany had led to the production of 'junk films in large quantities'.⁶ Welsh certainly anticipated the advent of the cheap quota films that John Maxwell later claimed came as a complete surprise to distributors and 'quality' film-makers. Similarly, the film producer Herbert Wilcox described the Quota Bill as 'inept, fatuous, and suicidal', an opinion shared rather more diplomatically by the impartial journal *The Economist*.⁷

In the end, the Act was forced through by the Conservative government against the opposition of the Labour and Liberal parties and most sections of the film industry that it professed to assist. *The Bioscope* was the only one of the half dozen trade papers to give its unequivocal support. There was to be a quota of British films – films made by a British subject, or a company based in the British Empire, with all studio scenes shot within the Empire – for both exhibitors and distributors, the latter being a higher percentage than the former so that exhibitors would be guaranteed choice in their selection of films.⁸ This quota was to rise incrementally over the next ten years from 5–20 per cent for exhibitors, and 7.5–20 per cent for distributors. The Act also sought to regulate the booking practices of distribution companies in the interests of protecting and promoting indigenous production.

The value of the Act has been a bone of contention in British film historiography. Those in the Rachael Low camp believed the Act was a failure because it led to the mass production of inferior films that exhibitors were forced to show; while revisionist historians have argued that the legislation produced films that competed successfully with American films in the domestic market, or that Low's 'inferior' films were not without merit or significance.⁹ The Quota Act may not have succeeded in ensuring that the lofty goals of cultural dissemination across the globe were achieved, or even that British audiences were protected from the excesses of Americanisation. It may have failed to guarantee that the quality of indigenous pictures would be universally high. However, it did unlock American finance for the uncertain business of British film production and stimulate a mushroom growth of indigenous film companies. By 1936 it had helped to almost quadruple the number of stages in film studios, produce a sixfold increase in

the number of pictures made, and establish the British cinema industry as the largest outside America.¹⁰ It also gave birth to the British supporting feature.

The fruits of protection

When this Act was passed, we never dreamed of the quota quickie. The quota quickie was a complete surprise.

John Maxwell, President of the Kinema Renters Society¹¹

The Quota Act had been in force for only a few months when the trade press began to chatter about the poor quality of product the American renters were commissioning or acquiring in order to fulfil their quota obligations.¹² Worse still, there was a widespread belief (denied by the renters concerned) that the practice of block booking – the packaging of mediocre films with desirable new product – was still being used by US companies. As early as July 1928, the British renter George Smith of PDC predicted that the quota would prove ‘unworkable’.¹³ The first steps of British production into the brave, new, protected world created by the Act were faltering. Charles Oakley has noted that *Kinematograph Weekly* was scathing about the performance of the expanding British film industry in 1928:

Thanks largely to mismanagement and to the appointment of unfit persons to boards of directors we have seen the failure of one company after another. They have been floated with high hopes, with much confidence in the spoon-feeding of the Quota Bill and with little executive competence. Few good British films were made.¹⁴

Edgar Wallace, the popular writer and prime mover behind the film producer and distributor, British Lion, put it more pithily: ‘I think the average British picture is rotten.’¹⁵ But then the national cinema was being redeveloped from a very low base. In 1927, it was suggested that there were only five or six directors and a similar number of cameramen of proven ability, while the number of art directors capable of designing major productions was even smaller.¹⁶ Fly-by-night companies, which had grabbed finance in the early days of the quota, ground out the odd film before folding. One company, Carlton Films, run by an Italian entrepreneur, Giovanni Glavany, collapsed when the picture it made for Warners failed to meet the requirements for quota registration. Even companies with previous experience of the film business, such as those set up by G. W. Pearson and George Banfield, often fared no better.¹⁷

The first three years of the Act coincided with the introduction of sound recording technology into studios and the gradual equipping of cinemas with sound-projection facilities. The sound revolution had not been anticipated by those who framed the Quota Act, and was dramatic in its speed. In November 1928 there were nineteen films in production at British studios. All were silent. A year later, the number of productions had almost halved, but all were talkies being produced at a faster rate.¹⁸ Thus, the early producers of quota films had suddenly to make pictures more quickly, and for less money, while mastering a new technology that was more expensive and required a revolution in scenario construction.¹⁹ Their efforts were never

likely to scale the heights of artistic achievement. Nevertheless, in the early stages of the Quota Act's operation, there was considerable satisfaction within the industry, particularly among film producers and the burgeoning distribution circuits. For instance, John Maxwell, the head of British International Pictures (BIP), was quoted as saying that the Act had been responsible for the 'renaissance of the British picture'.²⁰ Certainly, the proportion of British films among all those registered under the Act rose steadily and far exceeded the legal minimum: from a little under 14 per cent in 1928 to 22 per cent in 1932.²¹ It was a similar story for exhibition. In 1929, the exhibitors' quota was exceeded by 137 per cent, partly because of the growing vertical integration of the two main circuits.²² When *Kinematograph Weekly* took stock of the progress made by British films during the first three years of the Quota Act's operation, it recorded with satisfaction that: 'The days are gone when an exhibitor used to paste . . . "Coming Shortly" over any publicity matter which indicated that a given picture was British.'²³ British production was now thought to be at least 'on the map', although a home-grown film was yet to figure in 'the best twelve of the year'. In the same issue, film-maker John Grierson also tempered satisfaction at progress with an awareness of its limitations:

I would be sorry to minimise the great upstrokes the English industry has made within the past year or two. It has made films comparable in technical quality to American films, and *it has begun to believe in itself*. But it has neither the money for so vast and luxurious a scheme of national publicity, nor, I think, has it achieved that box-office sense which makes for the widespread and almost ultimate popularity of American films. . . . We are, in spirit, too near the somewhat tired and somewhat shabby sophistication of Piccadilly, too close to the English stage and its traditions and personnel. . . . At present there is too much mental inbreeding in the studios, and a consequent loss of spontaneity and freshness in the work of our directors.²⁴

The early days of quota production were volatile and confused. As City investors burned their fingers and looked for businesses with more secure prospects, the ground was largely cleared for the American distribution companies to finance British production on their own terms, or to set up their own satellite studios. At this time, according to film producer Edward Dryhurst:

The major American companies considered their obligation to acquire quota footage as a form of taxation which they were well able to write off; and when appalling domestic films brought howls of anguish from British audiences, the Americans chortled with glee.²⁵

Director Reginald Denham, who began his film career in 1931 as a dialogue director and production manager for Paramount British, recalled this as a time when 'a whole new bunch of incompetent people were churning out these pictures', and contracts were handed out by American renters 'like religious tracts on street corners'. He agreed with Dryhurst that, 'the worse they were the more delighted the Americans seemed. The one thing Hollywood didn't want was strong competition from the English film-makers.'²⁶ An indication of the lack of importance attached to quota production by one big American renter, MGM, was the awarding of the job of acquiring quota product to the head of prints and dispatch – an administrative

rather than creative post. MGM reportedly bought Lawrence Huntington's seventy-minute silent film, *After Many Years* (1930), for around £1,000 (still more than double its cost) and a contract to direct a talkie, *Romance in Rhythm* (1934), featuring the popular Carroll Gibbons orchestra.²⁷

Returning from a spell in Hollywood in the spring of 1930, the respected silent film director, George Pearson, cast an eye over the quota production in which he was soon to become involved. Not only had the 'talkie flood' swamped the silent film, but 'there were short-sighted film-makers' turning out 'catch-penny films made on shoe-string budgets'. Pearson feared that these 'ill-made Quickies' made 'the word "British" on a film a term of contempt'.²⁸ Pearson's view of the industry is typical of the social distinctions made at the time between gentlemen and players: respectable film-makers of 'integrity' and parvenu charlatans interested only in making a quick profit. Within it is the fear of competition, the threat to established orders and hierarchies. Gentlemen, it seemed, made their permanent homes in the studios of Islington and Shepherd's Bush, each a Mecca for Cambridge men, while the players moved peripatetically around the lesser floors.²⁹ Only a few directors – notably Major Sinclair Hill (OBE) – successfully negotiated the transitions between one production environment and the other. The distaste for what would come to be known as 'quota quickies' was almost inseparable from the dislike of the *nouveau riche*, the upwardly mobile: no breeding, no sense of responsibility. Pearson quotes with approval the words of his public school assistant Penrose Tennyson, a youth of 'fine fibre':

The Public School type that is to-day, say twenty, finds himself up against the competition of the Secondary School product. The latter has no family tradition, no money, hence has only his brains; it is a very dangerous rival. Youth now realizes that prestige counts for little, ability only matters. The old worship of safety and security no longer exists; all around the world is in pieces.³⁰

In a way, the quota quickies were some of the pieces the world was in: shoddy, tawdry things of little lasting substance – no tradition, no money. The class system was alive and well within British film production, and the distinction between 'quality' and 'quota' pictures has been further delineated over time; not least by Rachael Low, who views quota production as a cheap and vulgar flood which submerged the reputation of the industry.³¹ The only quota films she is prepared to exonerate are some of Michael Powell's early efforts, the Old Mother Riley and Max Miller films (which were popular first features) and 'one that Douglas Fairbanks made for Warners' (*Man of the Moment*, 1935, another first feature). And there, with a sweep of the pen, go perhaps two-thirds of the decade's pictures, 'dead weight' as far as Low is concerned.³²

Low is happy to validate a system of commodity differentiation in which the quota quickie occupied the bottom rung in the hierarchy of value. The common distinction between 'quality' and 'quota' was a major source of dissonance within the national film culture. As *Film Weekly's* studio correspondent put it at the end of 1932: 'The word "quota" applied to a picture is, normally, not so much a description as a term of abuse . . . there are films and quota films.'³³ This differentiation connoted a set of binary oppositions:

| Quality | Quota |
|---------------|--------------------|
| Slow | Fast |
| Careful | Careless |
| Crafted | Mass produced |
| Expensive | Cheap |
| Star value | Lack of star value |
| Innovative | Conventional |
| Metropolitan | Provincial |
| Prestigious | Debasing |
| Valuable | Worthless |
| Desired | Undesired |
| Enjoyed | Tolerated |
| Profit-making | Loss-making |
| Artful | Artless |
| Product | By-product |
| Superior | Inferior |
| Dominant | Subordinate |

This system of differentiation was rooted in the circumstances of film production, but it was the changes taking place in the organisation of exhibition that would ensure its cultivation.

Two for the price of one: the double bill

The double feature can be seen as an additional showman's attraction, part of the 'better business drive' that included cafés, ice-cream and cinema-organs, to bring the public back into the cinemas.³⁴

While the Quota Act has taken the blame for a proliferation of low-budget British pictures of dubious quality, there were two other important factors in the development of an exhibition system which often relegated these films to secondary attractions on double bills:

- 1 The sudden and rapid adoption of the technology of synchronised sound.
- 2 The deepening economic depression of the early 1930s.

Although supporting attractions had long been a part of the silent film programme, they were mainly comedy and actuality shorts or live variety performances. The adoption of talkie technology by exhibitors in 1929 and 1930 created a surplus of silent films that the newly equipped cinemas were reluctant to show. The British silent productions, the first fruits of the quota legislation, were now chasing a rapidly shrinking market. Those picture houses that had not yet converted to sound could rent these films cheaply and add them to their programmes. Showing two features in a programme gave these cinemas something with which to compete with the talkie houses – they could point to a three-hour programme of features in opposition to a talking picture, which lasted not much more than one hour. To counter this, more affluent cinemas began to show a silent film with a talkie, or even two talkies, and the demand for sound second fea-



Last of the silents: Herbert Wilcox (centre) directs *The Bondman* (1929) in the presence of author Hall Caine (right)

tures was born.³⁵ Five years later, F. W. Baker of the British Film Producers Group attributed the two-feature programme to an excess of supply in the market and the desire of exhibitors 'to give the public as much as they could for their money'.³⁶

The production industry was taken by surprise by the rapid conversion of cinemas to sound, and its distributors found they had a glut of silent features on their hands. Intended main features became programmers. This was the fate of Herbert Wilcox's picture *The Bondman* (1929), which the director later described as one of a series of unimportant but profitable films that he made in the last days of silent cinema.³⁷ That this particular picture was profitable is open to doubt. It took eighteen months to reach the provincial city of Leicester, where its three bookings were all as a supporting feature. Based on a Victorian novel of vendetta and self-sacrifice by Hall Caine, *The Bondman* is a thick and indigestible dollop of melodrama that requires an unreasonable effort in the suspension of disbelief. Burdened with conspicuous symbolism and unconvincing narrative development, it represented a style of storytelling that would be quickly displaced by the possibilities offered by the new technology of film-making. At the dawn of the 1930s it was already as outmoded as poorhouse gruel. The practice of distributors or exhibitors cutting films to fit the requirements of a double bill was condemned by the new Association of Cine-Technicians (ACT), but a little judicious editing of its bloated ninety-five minutes could only have benefited *The Bondman*.³⁸

Soon, all cinema managers began to realise that, by making a proportion of their second features British, they could meet their quota obligations. This strategy would not have worked if audiences had proved indifferent or hostile to the double bill. But, on the contrary, they embraced the idea to such an extent that it became commercially risky for exhibitors to offer only one feature. As the economic slump deepened and disposable incomes began to dwindle, showmen had to market their programmes more vigorously and competitively. So, as the smaller, inner-city and suburban cinemas began to offer a double bill at half the price or less of the city-centre supers, the largely circuit-owned supers flexed their muscles and began to screen, as supporting features, those films which other picture houses might be happy to play as main attractions. Thus, lower-budget features became part of a system of distinction for exhibitors. At first the distribution of quota films destined for the bottom half of the bill was controlled by British renters, but their position would quickly be usurped by the rental arms of the five Hollywood majors. MGM provided a sign of things to come when, in September 1930, eight months after the original trade show by Alpha Films, it picked up the revue *Comets* and cut it down to convenient second-feature length. It was a move that *The Bioscope* praised as enhancing the film's entertainment value.³⁹ The excessive length of programmes was already causing concern to the CEA, who considered that the public was getting more than value for money, and that two-and-a-quarter hours should be sufficient time for a full programme.⁴⁰ However, the evidence from Leicester suggests that British second features did not become a regular part of provincial cinema programmes until the middle of 1931, when the American renters began to enter the field in earnest.

It is a moot point whether the double bill was adopted earlier and more readily in Britain than in the USA, where similar economic and technological conditions prevailed, but where there was no quota to provide an additional impetus to the two-feature programme. The CEA's President, T. H. Fligelstone, certainly believed that the two-feature programme originated in Britain as part of 'the natural evolution of the trade'.⁴¹ Flynn and McCarthy date the first signs of double-bill programming in the USA to 1931, suggesting that by 1935, 85 per cent of cinemas had largely abandoned the single feature and specialist production houses had been established to satisfy audience demand for 'B' movies (indeed some had already folded).⁴² John Izod also dates the adoption of the two-feature programme in the USA to 1931, and explains it as a way of marketing the cinema experience at a time of deepening economic depression: 'The three-hour programme gave the movie-goer the sense, important in a time of financial stringency, of getting good value for the ticket price, which stayed at the same level as for a single feature.'⁴³

In Britain, as we have seen, the same marketing strategy was already supported by protectionist legislation and the backlog of indigenously produced silent films awaiting release. Thus, the early sound/silent double features suited the interests both of renters and exhibitors, as well as proving popular with audiences. But, with increasingly universal adoption, rather than being a way of securing an advantage over competitors, the double-feature programme ended up as an additional financial burden on exhibitors, who now had to rent two films instead of one.⁴⁴ Partly in recognition of this, distributors in both America and Britain developed a differential way of charging for first and second features. First features were typically rented for a percentage of audience revenue (usually 25–50 per cent), while supporting films were rented for a flat fee only. This meant that 'B' films came to represent a minor but steady and fairly predictable

income stream for both renters and producers, and offset some of the financial risks of high-budget features of uncertain popularity. Most of the major Hollywood studios also quickly realised that the inauguration of a 'B' movie unit had a number of additional benefits:

1. The producer/renter could gain a competitive advantage by offering a complete programme package to the exhibitor.
2. The studios could use their 'B' movies as an elaborate screen test for prospective stars, with the additional benefit of audience feedback.
3. Contracted artists could be found work, rather than remaining idle until a suitable part appeared.
4. The 'B' units could be used to train and give experience to new technicians.
5. The short production schedule of the 'B' film meant that it could be slipped in between longer major productions, thus making full use of studio space and contracted technicians (often during unsociable hours and without overtime payments) while allowing another film a more leisurely development stage.

Patriotic pictures

Our biggest competitors, the Americans, are paying us the compliment of bringing their money over to this country to make films in British studios . . . The films they make will be branded as British, it is to be hoped that they will be worthy of the name.⁴⁵

While some of the men who helped give impetus to the expansion of low-budget film-making in Britain have looked back on those days with jaundiced eyes, there is no doubt from contemporary accounts that the close of the 1920s was an exciting time to be making movies. *Picture Show's* young studio correspondent Edith Nepean clearly experienced the first months after the Quota Act as a time of optimism and possibilities: 'One of the liveliest and most inspiring places to-day in this country is a British film studio', she wrote at the beginning of 1928, 'apparently things will be even more hectic if the rumour is true that the Americans are coming over here to make pictures.'⁴⁶ The Americans would arrive in due course, but some of the Brits were returning to an industry that was showing signs of revival. John Stafford, for example, came back to England to form his own production company after gaining experience in Hollywood. Others would soon join him, including a young man who had begun to learn the film-making trade in France: Michael Powell. Over the next few years, Nepean's dispatches from the production front would draw no significant distinction between first and supporting features – all were treated as films made in British studios, all indicative of an industry on the rise. This seems to have been a general policy at *Picture Show*, with the magazine reviewing films in alphabetical, rather than prestige, order and devoting a similar space to each.

The fan magazines became increasingly enthusiastic about British production, particularly the almost absurdly patriotic *The British Film-Studio Mirror*, which was launched at the end of 1931. Even *Film Weekly*, which had been so critical of the early quota films that there had been attempts to ban its reviewers from press screenings, proudly ran a special issue on British cinema in the spring of 1932, declaring: 'This British number – which is unique in film journalism –

represents the culmination of our campaign for better British pictures. It is both a record of progress and a promise of even greater things to come.⁴⁷

Certainly, the number of fan clubs for British stars springing up in the early 1930s and the patriotic support for British product evident in the letters columns of fan magazines attest to a substantial level of satisfaction among audiences. *Picture Show*, for instance, received the following letter from a woman in Hendon:

It is really delightful to . . . find so many of our readers ready to support British films. Quite recently I organised a party of my girl friends to collect as many votes as possible for British and American films. The total amount was: British films 379 votes; American 152. Needless to say, I was delighted to find British films leading the way.⁴⁸

Another reader from Hythe thought that: 'American films . . . lack the reality and homeliness that British pictures have. In my opinion, English talkies are by far the better, although they do not have such expensive frocks, nor such elaborate settings.'⁴⁹ Perhaps the most interesting thing about these opinions is that they were expressed in a magazine whose core readership was young and female, the constituency one might have assumed to be highly vulnerable to the seductions of Hollywood. When the fan weekly *Girl's Cinema* was re-launched as *The Film Star Weekly* in 1932, a reader calling herself 'Britisher' wrote in support of one of the early quota stars: 'I'm so glad John Stuart has not been lured to Hollywood, and hope British producers will keep him here. He's so refreshing after the American heroes with their ugly twang.'⁵⁰

The advent of the talkies, with their ever-present differences of accent and language usage, seems to have sharpened the perception of the distinctiveness of British pictures. It is hard now to appreciate just how important 'correct' pronunciation was to many audience members in the early 1930s, and, with sudden exposure, how jarring and offensive many found 'slack' American speech. Vicky Lowe has drawn attention to the critical role played by the voice in influencing the reception of early sound films: 'In the 1930s, it is particularly clear that the sound of actors' voices on films was crucial in both reinforcing and challenging national, regional and gendered identities; the aural significance of what was considered to be "British" was being constantly negotiated.'⁵¹

Lowe goes on to argue that, for many audiences, the unconvincing and unacceptable sound of British actors' voices resulted in their performances being viewed as acts of 'cultural ventriloquism', disrupting the immersion in the reality of what was happening on screen. However, in the early days of sound, it appears that it was more often American speech that was experienced as jarring and disruptive of the easy suspension of disbelief. Exhibitors, writing in the trade press, frequently noted the alienating effect on their audiences of the 'nasal' American accent and 'crude American vernacular'.⁵² *Picture Show's* redoubtable defender of the national culture, Edward Wood, cautioned against underestimating the corrosive effects of American slang:

People in high places may argue that the slang of the people cannot affect the moral fibre or the financial stability of a nation, but this is a fallacy – and a very dangerous fallacy. A slang phrase, a music-hall joke, a popular song – all these have done more to mould public opinion than sermons and speeches.⁵³

His readers were quick to support him. One wrote from north London recommending: 'For good acting and clear speech, go to any cinema showing a British film, and there you will get real entertainment.'⁵⁴ Even in the distant outposts of Empire like Madras, some gave thanks for the linguistic purity of English cinema in ways that would have gladdened the hearts of those who framed the Quota Act:

The majesty of King's English is maintained in all its glory and dignity by those like Ralph Lynn, Tom Walls and Edna Best . . . They are not only great stars but great teachers. Many a day have I gone home after the pictures pronouncing a word as an Englishman does.⁵⁵

The problem for many of the readers and contributors to *Picture Show* was that the indigenous cinema struggled to gain the recognition and prestige it deserved. This was clearly evident in the magazine's first issue of 1932. The tone was set by the full-page advertisement by the Empire Marketing Board informing readers of 'Your Job for your country', which was 'to restore the nation's trade balance and to provide work for British men and women' by buying only home- and Empire-made goods 'produced at least as well there as in any foreign land'. That this injunction applied equally to films was emphasised in both the editorial and letter columns. Edward Wood predicted that 'instead of being used as fill-ups for programmes featuring American pictures', British films would become 'the programme feature, and deservedly so'.⁵⁶ This sort of rhetoric puts a different complexion on the maligned quota quickies, patriotically conferring on at least some of these modest productions the status of enforced subordination, victims of foreign domination. As it became clear that the quota legislation was failing fully to deliver cultural prowess (as opposed to economic success) to British pictures, Wood renewed his beating of the patriotic drum in support of bringing Old England to the screen:

While American and foreign competitors are exploiting Vienna and other Continental cities let our British producers centre on Great Britain and the Empire. The castles and stately homes of England, its picturesque cottages and inns are still standing in sufficient quantities to provide natural backgrounds at small expense.⁵⁷

His constant refrain: 'Show England, and every Englishman will be proud of his country' would again have been melodious to the ears of the authors of the Quota Act.⁵⁸ So too would patriotic and optimistic articles like *Film Pictorial's* 'Showing Britain to the World: Ideas and Ideals on the Screen', which also indicated that the imperial intentions of the Act had not been forgotten:

Now that British films are finding their place in the world, the natives of Timbuctoo and the Chinese of Shanghai will find out that all that has been best in the world is not represented by sky-scrapers and their inhabitants. They will learn that the Britain, of which they have heard, but unfortunately seen so little on the screen so far, is a pleasanter country than its mighty offspring.⁵⁹

The key to cultural acceptance abroad was the same as that to pride at home: the romantic depiction of the British countryside, which was thought to have an irresistible effect on all viewers. Programmers like BIP's *Mr. Bill the Conqueror* (1932) and Butcher's *The Great Gay*

Road (1931) – showing the beauties of Sussex and Kent, respectively – certainly encapsulated the rural spell, but the latter's 'charming glimpses of Chiddington, Godstone, Forest Row, and Box Hill' probably struggled for bookings among the natives of Scotland and Tyneside, never mind Shanghai and Timbuctoo.

The detectable support for British product was certainly not confined to first features. In just one issue of *Picture Show* in 1934 there were three letters offering praise to British programmers. Ada Connell wrote to say that she had 'never seen such natural acting' as that in the MGM quickie *Commissionaire* (1933). Evelyn Speed suggested that American films could not match the 'sincerity' of Michael Powell's *Red Ensign* (1934); while Albert Race included John Baxter's *Doss House* (1933) and *Reunion* (1932) among his shortlist of memorable films free of 'love scenes'.⁶⁰ A few months earlier, *Film Pictorial* had published a letter comparing quota featurettes favourably with American short films:

These little productions, some of them only forty or fifty minutes long, may well take the place of the miserable drivell from America purporting to be comedy which we have had to endure far too long. Surely the average English audience would prefer the robust but wholesome humour of [British quota films] . . . to the nonsensical antics of most American two-reel comedians.⁶¹

Reviews in the fan magazines could also often be favourable to low-budget British productions. For example, in its issue of 9 July 1932 *Film Pictorial* chose Paramount British's dockland drama *Ebb Tide* (1932) as its film of the week. It also enthused about PDC's 'unpretentious' but 'very good little effort', *Account Rendered* (1932), and ran a feature on its riches-to-rags star, Marilyn Mawn. It even managed to describe Universal's *Above Rubies* (1932), directed by one of the quota's less competent practitioners, Frank Richardson, as 'four thousand feet of pleasing enough entertainment'. It did admit that BIP's *The Strangler* (1932) was 'not a film which is likely to add lots of laurels to Britain's talkie crown', but could still advise that there was a thrill to be had 'if you like haunted rooms and storms, and badly lighted old houses'. In the early years of sound, there was less of a divide between low- and high-budget productions. At BIP, one of the national cinema's most significant studios, for example, the average expenditure on a film was only £10,000 – less than double that of the standard quickie.⁶²

While there was widespread patriotic support for the idea of a British cinema, there were substantial doubts about the effect that the exhibition trend towards double-feature programmes might have on its development. At the 1931 CEA Summer Conference in Brighton, the double bill was an urgent topic of debate. An editorial in *The Bioscope* expressed the concerns of many in the film business about the growing acceptance of two-feature programming, and invited resistance:

Single Feature Bills . . . would mean a more critical study by the exhibitor of the feature films he was buying, and also a more critical study of the short supporting subjects. The effect of this could not fail quickly to raise the standard of quality in both cases. . . . There are many films still being produced for Quota requirements which are only securing – and, indeed, deserving – a second place on the programme. With a reduced demand for feature-length subjects, every British film made would have to be produced with an eye to its suitability for 'topping the bill'. There would

be a reduced market for mere long-length Quota subjects and increased concentration on first class subjects capable of holding a premier position.⁶³

But it was to be *The Bioscope* that disappeared in the following year while the position of the double bill strengthened. In London, by 1932, leading general-release cinemas like the Stoll Picture Theatre, Kingsway and the Trocadero in the Elephant and Castle, were engaged in cut-throat competition to show the biggest double-feature programme. These giant cinemas gave their patrons two (and even three) films that would each top the bill at lesser venues. *Film Weekly* thought that these super programmes 'must make provincial filmgoers green with envy', as smaller cinemas had to rely on purpose-made supporting features or more expensive flops to complete their bills.⁶⁴ However, the rise of these British supporting features is evident from the table below. The films identified are those listed in the Filmography, and the classification is based on the knowledge or strong supposition that these pictures played mainly as supporting features on their first release.

There are a number of observations to be made from this data:

1. Supporting features constitute almost half the films made in Britain between the first two Quota Acts. In 1932, 1933, 1934 and 1937 they were in a majority.

Table 1.1 British film production 1928–37

| Year | 1928 | 1929 | 1930 | 1931 | 1932 | 1933 | 1934 | 1935 | 1936 | 1937 | Total |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| British films produced | 108 | 65 | 114 | 144 | 152 | 177 | 195 | 187 | 230 | 191 | 1563 |
| British films registered | 91 | 83 | 132 | 145 | 156 | 189 | 190 | 198 | 222 | 225 | 1631 |
| Supporting features | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 33–9 minutes | 2 | 2 | 14 | 10 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 54 |
| 40–70 minutes | 12 | 12 | 30 | 45 | 50 | 84 | 81 | 67 | 71 | 75 | 527 |
| >70 minutes | 15 | 6 | 6 | 10 | 20 | 20 | 24 | 23 | 34 | 32 | 190 |
| Total | 29 | 20 | 50 | 65 | 78 | 108 | 108 | 92 | 110 | 111 | 771 |
| % films made in Britain | 26.8 | 30.8 | 43.9 | 45.1 | 51.3 | 61.0 | 55.3 | 49.2 | 47.8 | 58.1 | 49.1 |
| Exhibitors' quota % | 5 | 7.5 | 10 | 10 | 12.5 | 15 | 17.5 | 17.5 | 20 | 20 | |

2. The number of British supporting features produced increased by almost 550 per cent between 1929 and 1933, and then remained fairly constant until the second Quota Act.
3. Second features are often identified by their briefer running time, but almost a quarter ran over seventy minutes. In the last days of silent film, these longer films were the majority. We can regard many of them as 'sunken' first features or films that failed. Their accommodation on double bills usually meant a lengthening of the programme.
4. The average length of supporting features increased as the second Quota Act approached. In 1933, films over seventy minutes constituted only 18.5 per cent of the total, but in 1937 they were 28.1 per cent. At the same time, short supporting featurettes under forty minutes were squeezed out: there were fourteen in 1930, but only four in 1937.
5. The number of British supporting features produced each year was not related simply to quota requirements: in 1933, when the exhibitors' quota was 15 per cent, 108 were produced (61 per cent), in 1935 when the quota was 17.5 per cent, only ninety were made (48 per cent). We might attribute this to the Korda effect: the success of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) meant that finance was more readily available for bigger-budget films.

Now that we have some idea of the population size of British supporting features and have identified some of their salient characteristics, it is time to see how they were made.

Notes

1. Cmd. 5320: 702.
2. PEP, *The British Film Industry* (London: Political and Economic Planning, 1952), p. 42. On the dominance of Hollywood over the British film industry see Kenton Bamford, *Distorted Images: British National Identity and Film in the 1920s* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).
3. Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992), especially Chapter 8.
4. Linda Wood, 'Low-budget British Films in the 1930s', in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 2001), p. 53. See also Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government 1927–84* (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 15–16, 29–30. See also Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), Chapter 3, which remains one of the best introductions to the act and its effect on British production.
5. Fears were expressed by exhibitors' representatives on the Joint Committee about 'whether British films of a suitable quality for exhibition would be forthcoming in sufficient numbers and at a suitable price'. *The Times*, 4 August 1926, p. 10.
6. 'Why Has the Quota Been Introduced?', *Daily Film Renter*, 22 March 1927.
7. *Daily Film Renter*, 22 March 1927; *The Economist*, 20 March 1927.
8. There were further stipulations in the definition of a British film, concerning the nationality of the scenarist and the percentage of labour costs paid to British subjects. See Dickinson and Street, *Cinema and State*, pp. 5–33; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918–29* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971).
9. Revisionist work includes: Napper, 'A Despicable Tradition? Quota Quickies in the 1930s', in Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, pp. 45–52; Wood, 'Low-budget British Films'; Matthew Sweet, *Shepperton Babylon* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005); H. Mark Glancy, 'Hollywood and

- Britain: MGM and the British “Quota”, in Jeffrey Richards (ed.), *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of British Cinema 1929–1939* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 57–72; John Sedgwick, ‘Cinema-going Preferences in Britain in the 1930s’, in Richards (ed.), *The Unknown 1930s*, pp. 1–35.
10. Cmd. 5320: Memorandum of the Film Producers’ Group.
 11. ‘Final Evidence on Quota Act Revision’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 15 October 1936, p. 11.
 12. For example, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 21 June 1928.
 13. *The Cinema*, 4 July 1928, p. 3.
 14. Quoted in Charles Oakley, *Where We Came In* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), pp. 101–2.
 15. Quoted in P. L. Mannonck, ‘Will British Films Improve?’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 2 January 1930, p. 67.
 16. R. G. Martin, ‘Prospects of the Film Industry’, *Financial Review of Reviews*, July 1927, p. 41.
 17. British Screen Productions, British Filmcraft Productions and Audible Filmcraft.
 18. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 21 November 1929, p. 47.
 19. Sound virtually doubled the average cost of film production. Dickinson and Street, *Cinema and State*, p. 42.
 20. *The Bioscope*, 6 June 1930.
 21. *The Cinema*, 3 January 1934.
 22. Dickinson and Street, *Cinema and State*, p. 41.
 23. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 January 1931, p. 73.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
 25. Edward Dryhurst, *Gilt Off the Gingerbread* (London: Bachman & Turner, 1987), p. 172.
 26. Reginald Denham, *Stars in My Hair* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1958), p. 175. Denham regarded the time devoted to his film career as time lost to his real love: the theatre. Twenty years after making them, he had forgotten the titles of all the twenty-four quota pictures he made for Paramount, Fox, George Smith and others. Only a handful of the larger-budget films gave him any pleasure and he remained ashamed of the others.
 27. Profile of Huntington supplied by Rank’s publicity department in the 1940s.
 28. George Pearson, *Flashback* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 187.
 29. On the significance of Cambridge University in Gaumont-British recruitment see BECTU Oral History Project, Interview 108 with Hugh Stewart, 23 November 1989.
 30. Pearson, *Flashback*, pp. 190, 192.
 31. ‘Unfortunately British production was swamped by the boring, badly made and routine work of the quota producers.’ Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1929–1939* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 115.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
 33. Stephen Watts, ‘High-Speed Film Making’, *Film Weekly*, 16 December 1932, p. 12.
 34. PEP, *The British Film Industry*, p. 54.
 35. The 1930 *Kinematograph Year Book* (p. 12) could report that it was ‘generally recognized that an entertainment should consist of a talkie, a silent, and either a comedy or a variety turn’. Cameraman, Leonard Harris recalled that his small local cinema in north London began to show silent films as second features when it first converted to sound. BECTU Oral History Project, Interview 189, 18 March 1991. In Berlin, double bills of talkies were being shown as early as the summer of 1930,

- although renters and other exhibitors had already combined to try to prevent this practice. *The Bioscope*, 10 September 1930, p. 25.
36. Cmd. 5320: 366.
 37. Herbert Wilcox, *Twenty-Five Thousand Sunsets* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1967), p. 83.
 38. An Aberdeen cinemagoer also complained about this practice to *Picture Show*, 29 September 1929, p. 4.
 39. *The Bioscope*, 24 September 1930, p. 43.
 40. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
 41. Cmd. 5320: 872–4.
 42. Charles Flynn and Todd McCarthy, 'The Economic Imperative: Why Was the B Movie Necessary?', in Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (eds), *Kings of the Bs: Working within the Hollywood System* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), p. 15.
 43. John Izod, *Hollywood and the Box Office 1895–1986* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 99.
 44. Industry analyst, Simon Rowson, estimated that the two-feature programme had been adopted by more than 50 per cent of cinemas in both Britain and the USA by 1936. Cmd. 5320: 1276. In Leicester, adoption was near universal.
 45. *The British Film-Studio Mirror* no. 3, February–March 1932, p. 3.
 46. *Picture Show*, 21 January 1928, p. 9.
 47. *Film Weekly*, 29 April 1932, p. 7.
 48. Letter from Q. L. T. of Hendon, *Picture Show*, 15 August 1931, p. 5.
 49. Letter from V. H. of Hythe, *Picture Show*, 31 October 1931, p. 4. Correspondents from 'The Empire' expressed similar sentiments. A reader in Bombay, India, conceded that American films had 'more originality, more scenery and better material', but insisted that British films were 'of more solid worth, with clear dialogue, and clever, good stories'. *Picture Show*, 31 October 1931, p. 4.
 50. Letter from 'Britisher', *The Film Star Weekly*, 26 November 1932, p. 37.
 51. Vicky Lowe, 'The Best Speaking Voices in the World: Robert Donat, Stardom and the Voice in British Cinema', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* vol. 1 no. 2, 2005, p. 182. Conscious of the appeal to audiences of ordinary English speech, BIP adopted the slogan 'Talkies that talk as you talk!' See the press book for Thomas Bentley's 'symphony of everyday life', *After Office Hours* (1932).
 52. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 January 1931, p. 101.
 53. *Picture Show*, 23 July 1932, p. 18.
 54. Letter from 'Hussar', *Picture Show*, 2 July 1932, p. 27.
 55. Letter from B. B. A., *Picture Show*, 27 August 1932, p. 4.
 56. *Picture Show*, 2 January 1932.
 57. 'More Costume Plays Wanted', *Picture Show*, 23 January 1932, p. 21.
 58. 'Show England', *Picture Show*, 23 July 1932, pp. 18–19. See also C. B. Cochran, 'Let Us Have Really British Films', *Cinematograph Times*, 3 January 1931, p. 62.
 59. *Film Pictorial*, 17 September 1932, p. 20.
 60. Letters from Ada Connell of Wandsworth, Evelyn Speed of Enfield and Albert Race of Sheffield, *Picture Show*, 18 August 1934, p. 28.
 61. Letter to *Film Pictorial*, 30 December 1933, p. 30. Rather than supporting Stephen Shafer's contention that British productions were enjoyed by the 'poor and unemployed', the letter's middle-