"THE SPANISH DANCER" (Paramount, 1923). Produced and directed by Herbert Brenon; scenario by June Mathis and Beulah Marie Dix from the original play "Don Cesar de Bazan" by Adolphe D’Emmery and P. S. P. Dumanoir.


An elaborate melodrama of the "Carmen" school, "The Spanish Dancer" is a very handsome production, and a good vehicle for Pola Negri, of whom one sees very little these days. One of Paramount’s "specials" for the year, it opened concurrently at the Rivoli in New York, and Grauman’s Rialto in Los Angeles. An immediate hit in both situations (the Rivoli proudly announced 9,033 paid admissions on its first day, a Sunday) it nevertheless drew somewhat mixed reviews. Most were far more enthusiastic than the film now seems to warrant, and all were agreed that it was Negri’s best American vehicle to date. (It was her third American film). The NY Globe remarked: "Pola is more lustrous than ever", while the comment of the NY Telegraph was: "Gorgeous in the strictest sense of the word... from first to last, vibrant with life. It is a long picture, but never a dull one". The NY World: "There seems to be more of the dash of the old European Pola Negri in "The Spanish Dancer" than in any cinema she has made since Hollywood got hold of her".

The Evening World was even more positive about Pola’s "improvement", finding that she was "one thousand percent better than in "The Cheat" and "Bella Donna". In "The Spanish Dancer" one finds the old flaming glorious gorgeous Pola Negri, and one finds a good deal more. Will undubtably make millions of dollars."

The Evening World’s critic must have had a real yen for Miss Negri, for its difficult to see her performance as being THAT good. If memory serves correctly, she was much better in another Brenon dilm, "Shadows of Paris".

A swashbuckler without any swashbuckling, "The Spanish Dancer" is staged on the same massive scale as Brenon’s old Annette Kellerman epics. It has huge sets and massive crowd scenes - but with pomp and ceremony substituting for action. Nobody gives Pola too much competition as she romps through all this - least of all Wallace Beery as an extremely unlikely King of Spain, but there is the usual reliable performance from Adolphe Menjou as a scheming politician.

A word now about the print, which is woefully incomplete, and cannot represent much more than half of the original film. Frankly the impression one gets is that even complete, "The Spanish Dancer" wouldn’t have been a particularly good film. But it is certainly unfair to judge from this version, which is in bed a shape physically as any we have ever come across. Despite torn sprockets throughout, it does, miraculously, run through a projector, but a few sections are very badly spliced up. We would not normally show such a print, but with so little Negri material around, we feel an exception has to be made in this case. Actually, the pictorial quality (it’s a toned original) looks fine on the screen, and belies the trouble your projectionist will be having keeping it on the screen. Ironically, it’s the same print we ran in our earliest days. Then it was owned by a NY collector. Somehow the print made its way out to Hollywood in the intervening six years! If you make allowances for both the print - and a good deal of missing footage - we think you’ll find "The Spanish Dancer" a generally enjoyable production. It runs approximately one hour.
"THE PONY EXPRESS" (Paramount, 1925) Produced and directed by James Cruze; photographed by Karl Brown; from the story by Henry James Forman and Walter Woods.

With Ricardo Cortez, Betty Compson, Wallace Beery, Ernest Torrence, George Bancroft, Frank Lackteen, Hank Bell, Ernie Adams.

A follow-up to Cruze's own "The Covered Wagon" and Ford's "The Iron Horse", "The Pony Express" is certainly the weakest of the trio, but is a spectacular and carefully made epic none-the-less. Its main trouble is its very thin story-line and the sparseness of its action. Because "The Covered Wagon" had an epic theme of national progress, its flimsy personal story-line hardly mattered. But the story of the forming of the Pony Express route from St. Joseph to Sacramento, while important in the overall development of the West, was of more political than pioneering interest. One doesn't have the surge of civilization on the march to give it stature; and without a stronger personal, or fictional, story to counterbalance, the whole thing falls a little flat. With less running time this would not be so apparent, but Paramount followed a fallacious theory in the 20's that ALL epics had to be LONG -- and it ruined more of their films than one cares to remember. Frank Lloyd's story of Jean Lafitte, "Eagle of the Sea" was one -- and another Cruze film, "Old Ironsides", told falteringly in 10 reels what could far more enjoyably have been told in eight.

Our version of "The Pony Express", being an "edited" Kodascope print, runs some four reels shorter than the original. And yet it contains ALL of the action material, and practically all of the plot. It's interesting to recall the comments of the trade publication "The Moving Picture World" (later the Motion Picture Herald) which, although giving the film an enthusiastic review, stated:

"Its bare outline does not furnish anything like sufficient material for a picture of this length..... The greatest part of the footage is devoted to picturing in detail incidents that build up the various characters and establish the atmosphere, but many of them do little to advance the story. In fact, practically until the climax the Pony Express itself is kept in view only by occasional subtitles and a few short shots showing the establishment of the relay stations, etc. The story would be materially strengthened by generous cutting".

This is certainly one case where cutting seems to have helped the film, and where we needn't apologise for a shortened version (even though we'd like to run the whole thing). All that I can remember of the original that is not in this is a good deal more of Torrence and Beery, and a climax wherein Ricardo Cortez goes off to fight in the Civil War, leaving Betty Compson alone for a full-screen tear-stained close-up fadeout. Certainly there was no more action material, and the Indian attack on the covered wagon train always took place off screen.

Nevertheless, there is much in the film that is most impressive. Historically, it seems to be more accurate than most of its species -- even to weakening the force of its climax a little by allowing the villain to escape scot-free. Indeed, the villain comes off best of all, being promoted for his misdeeds! George Bancroft gives probably the best performance of all in this role, as Jack Slade. (Slade, a laman who went wrong, was ultimately lynched; there was a reasonably accurate biopic about him a few years ago from Allied Artists, with Mark Stevens as Slade). The photography by Karl Brown, Cruze's favorite cameraman ("The Covered Wagon", "Fighting Coward", "Beggar on Horseback") is particularly fine, and makes the most of the excellent locations -- wide expanses of prairie, and a particularly convincing reconstruction of the old relay station township, Julesburg -- depicted here as it probably was, as a collection of wooden shacks in the middle of nowhere.
There's a very well-done episode of the first pony express ride across country, which shows some of the mechanics of the "trade" -- mules beating a path through the snow, and so on. And of course there's a big Indian raid for the climax, although typically of Cruze, it's short, sharp, and underplayed. Unlike Griffith and Ford who built their action sequences via pacing and editing, Cruze seemed uninterested in action as such. It was just a means to an end -- to be shown as spectacularly as possible, but not something to waste any time over. With all those hordes of Indians and cavalry on hand, one wishes that Cruze could have come up with something a little more exciting -- but even so, it makes for a rousing finish.

Incidentally, there's a typical name-dropping gimmick in the casual revelation that a little boy is Buffalo Bill Cody! In the abysmal remake of a few years back, Hickok and Cody were the heroes -- in the persons of Charlton Heston and Forrest Tucker. And in keeping with the spirit of the 50's, there were two girls instead of one! Somewhere in the original film Mark Twain was brought in for a single scene, but I failed to spot him in this version -- it was probably a scene involving Jack Slade, since Twain did write a good deal about that character.

"The Pony Express" opened up day and date in New York at the Rivoli and Rialto Theatres, grossing $11,000 on the first day. It proved to be a big money-maker, but was soon forgotten, and figured on only one or two of the "Best Ten" lists at the end of 1925. However, since that year had such competition as "The Gold Rush", "Phantom of the Opera", "Freshman", "The Lost World", "The Big Parade", "Peter Pan" and scores of others, maybe it isn't too surprising. However, it made more of the "Best Ten" lists than did Cruze's previous "Beggar on Horseback" which from all accounts was quite a remarkable picture. Incidentally, another film turning up on quite a lot of "Best 10" listings for 1925 was "Shore Leave", due for presentation next month.

Program Notes & Enquiries: Wm. K. Everson, Bradford Hotel, 210 W. 70th St., NYC Committee: Edward S. Gorey, Sandra Everson, Charles Shibuk, Dorothy Lovell.

Next program: Friday, February 6th.

A RICHARD BARTH ELM ESS program:

"SHORE LEAVE" (1925) starring Barthelmess and Dorothy Mackaill; and excerpts from "WAY DOWN EAST", "TOL'SABLE DAVID" and "THE DROP KICK".