"THE HATCHET MAN" (WB-First National, 1932) Dir: William A. Wellman; Scenario by J. Grubb Alexander, from a play by Ahmed Abdullah and David Belasco; photographed by Sid Hickox; edited by Owen Marks; original production title, and European release title: "The Honorable Mr. Wong". Eight Reels.


In his early thirties period at Warners, William Wellman made some curiously unsavoury melodramas which seemed hardly to come from the same man who had guided the clean-cut hoke of "Wings", the sordid but honest reality of "The Public Enemy" and the optimistic all-Americanism of "The Conquerors". Obviously he had little say in the script that was handed to him, yet he seems to have brought a certain relish to the more unpleasant of his Warner-choruses. "Night Nurse" was a thoroughly "sick" film, in the fullest sense of that contemporary phrase, and "The Hatchet Man" is cut from much the same pattern. Since it combined Oriental grand guignol with a gangster motif, two dominant themes of the period, it was obviously considered sure-fire in that era (and a wonderful era it was) of rich, lush, no-punches-pulled melodramas. Today it is still lots of fun, and packs quite a wallop, but it does seem rather a pity to see so much talent and style wasted on such tawdry and cheap material.

Unfortunately it isn't possible to take much of it too seriously. As soon as Robinson swaggers in with his best "Little Caesar" manner - and gives out with dialogue to match - any suspicion that he could be even remotely Chinese goes out the window, despite frequent uses of Chinese proverbs ("It is written that...") and lines like "Why, we came over on the boat from China together". Loretta Young is even less convincing, and seeing all our old gangster pals from the 30's switching from Italians to Orientals puts the finishing touch on it all. At least Warners let Ralph Ince play his usual No. 1 Hood as an American however, and for that we can be thankful.

"The Hatchet Man" is pretty raw stuff nevertheless. None of the characters are very pleasing. Almost all of the murders seem to go unpunished, and the whole thing winds up in a house of prostitution and drug addiction. However, although the picture makes it quite plain what is going on, the sound track tries awfully hard to convince you otherwise. When Robinson asks directions to "Madame Si-Si's House in the Street of Red Lanterns, where one can enjoy the Pipe of Golden Peace", he is told that it is a tea-shop! And a cobbler explains that he is making shoes for the poor tired little feet of the serving-girls!

However, at least the required melodramatic guts are there, without being coyp, sidestepped, or sensationaly exploited. With all its smile-provoking moments, it's still an accomplished and enjoyable melodrama, done with real style. The sets are lavish, the photography mobile, the musical score (mainly utilizing "Poor Butterfly" as a symbolic motif for Loretta Young) so very typical of the period. Incidentally, the film's story opens in 1917; after a prologue, it switches to the present (1932) and a title tells us that the events of 15 years ago are now ancient history; here, now, is modern Chinatown living. Almost thirty years later, that too seems to belong to the dim and very distant past.

Incidentally, as with so many Wellman films ("The Public Enemy", "Yellow Sky", several others) the opening sequence grips one's attention right away, and is probably the best individual sequence in the picture. (I remember it scaring
me silly as a child of four, even though I had only the vaguest idea of what was going on. But admitted at that age it was easier to be scared by songs and dragons than by the not-so-clearly specified terrors of Madame Si-Sil's House! It is a beautifully done episode by any standards. However, the film as a whole, for all its lushness, is more "thick ear" than "class" melodrama; what an exotic silk purse Von Sternberg might have fashioned out of this, with an assist from La Dietrich.

By the way, the opening Chinatown scenes (behind the foreword) are taken from the Richard Barthelmess-Frank Lloyd film, "Son of the Gods".

INTERMISSION

"A GAME OF DEATH" (Rko Radio, 1945) Directed by Robert Wise; executive prod. Sig Rokell; producer, Herman Schlam; photographed by J. Roy Hunt; screenplay by Norman Houston, from an original short story "The Most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell; music: Paul Sawtell. 8 reels.

With John Loder, Edgar Barrier, Audrey Long, Russell Wade, Russell Hicks, Jason Robards, Gene Stutenroth, Noble Johnson, Robert Clarke.

Robert Wise is the latest director to receive the doubtful honor of having a "cult" center around him. The only trouble with cults is that they arrive too late, usually when the director in question is safely ensconced in a rut of big, safe, expensive pictures that can't fail to be moderately accomplished and reasonably entertaining. But any one of Wise's recent pictures could have been directed just as well by Richard Brooks or Mark Robson, and without credit titles, no one would have known who directed it. But 15 years ago, when these boys were starting out, fresh and eager, you knew right away which Lewton was directed by Wise and which by Robson. Style - personal style - has a habit of growing smaller and smaller as the budgets grow bigger. Cults, to have any value, should take root when the center of their adoration is doing worthwhile work. And almost without exception - Griffith, Siodmak, Lang - the record shows that a director does his best work in his first ten years of activity. (Ford is one of the very few notable exceptions). Wyler certainly has become more ponderous and uncinematic as the years have rolled by. But what vigorous work he was doing in the early thirties; what a film he could have come up with if he'd been handed "Ben Hur" then.

Perhaps the only one thing that can really be said in favor of cults is that they provide a legitimate excuse for the revival of earlier films of the director in question, and since "A Game of Death" hasn't had a theatrical showing in some years, and hasn't yet appeared on tv, a revival is certainly overdue.

The original story by Richard Connell is one of the best and most serviceable properties that Hollywood thrillers have ever had. The first version, by Michel and Schoedsack, with Leslie Banks, Fay Wray, Joel McCrea and Robert Armstrong, was a whale of a thriller, tense and atmospheric throughout. NTA own it today for both tv and theatrical reissue, but alas there has been no sign of life for it in either outlet. It should stand the test of time well. "A Game of Death" was the second version, quite faithful to the original, except that it was made during Hollywood's romance with Russia, and thus the original Zoroff now became a Teutonic Krieger. A later and abysmal version, "Run for the Sun" (which didn't get down to the basic plot until half-way through) retained the Nazi villain, in the person of Trevor Howard. There was also an unauthorized offspring, "Kill or Be Killed" (George Colorius), quite obviously "inspired" by the story if not actually based on it.

Wise seems to have studied the original fairly closely, and copied most of
the shots exactly. The hysterical rushing through the jungle (incidentally, a better studio jungle than most) with the camera pulling back through the foliage, in front of the fugitives, is especially closely (and effectively) copied. This was one of Schoedsack’s favorite “fever-pitch-excitement” photographic devices; he utilized it several times in “King Kong” too.

Of course, one rather necessary reason for copying the original as much as possible was to allow for the utilization of stock footage from the original. And it isn’t difficult to spot: “A Game of Death” has typical glossy studio lighting of the 40’s; the older (and better) shots are harsher, greyer, far more atmospheric. Look closely and you’ll spot Leslie Banks, Fay Wray and Joel McCrea in several scenes. Noble Johnson is in both the new and old footage; once, by some neat juxtaposition by the editor, he even passes himself in the jungle.

Incidentally, there’s a particularly good performance by Gene Stutenroth as Fleshki, the villain’s henchman. He has been in countless melodramas, serials and westerns since, but never so effectively. And what a pleasure to see again a real old-time villain, enjoying his evil for its own sake, playing the classics on the piano as he contemplates murder and rape, and stroking his forehead periodically to remind us that an old wound has made him a little abnormal!” This kind of villainy — and this kind of thriller — taut, tense, short, devoid of padding — is unhappily already a thing of the past.

— W. K. EVerson —

Coming programmes:

Next Sunday, New Yorker Theatre, 9.30 a.m., 35mm show. (TONED PRINTS)

FRENZIED FLAMES (1926) Cullen Landis, Mary Carr, Virginia Brown Faire
THE WRONGDOERS (1925) Lionel Barrymore, Henry Hull, Tom Brown

Next Tuesday, Adelphi Hall, 7.30 p.m.

THE WHITE SIN (1924, William Seiter) John Bowers, Madge Bellamy

Coming in July:

A SPECTACULAR "DISASTER" PROGRAM —-

Elmer Clifton’s THE WRECK OF THE Hesperus (1927)

Plus — from silent and sound films — a collection of thrill sequences — train wrecks — earthquake — forest fire — shipwreck — tornado — flood etc.

"THE HATCHET MAN"

As a post-script, it is perhaps worth mentioning that this film was one of the first to use the “No one seated during the last five minutes” gimmick in its advertising — and from all accounts, exhibitors did adhere to it quite strictly.