A Program of Shock & Sensation from the Early 30's

"DR. X" --- "HELL'S ANGELS"

"DR. X" (First National, 1932) Directed by Michael Curtiz; from a play by Howard Hoxton and Allen C. Miller; adapted by Earl Baldwin and Robert Tasker; edited by George Amy; photographed by Ray Rennahan and Richard Rover, C. Reiss.

Starring: LIONEL AFTWILL, PAT WIRY, LEE TRACY, with Preston Foster, George Rosemarie, Lelia Perry, Howard Napier, Garvey, John Wray, Harry Beresford, Robert Warrick, W. Territt, Robert Robertson, Thomas Jackson, Harry Holman, Max Busch, Tom Dugan, Selma Jackson.

Mamoulian's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" apart (and that is now kept off the market by Metro), "DR. X" is the most elusive of all the early horror films. Theatrical releases and/or tv have given careful care to all the others (if not in New York in all cases) but "DR. X" has steadfastly refused to reappear.

Because one always expects too much of the apparently unavailable, it would be easy to be disappointed by "DR. X" after all these years of waiting. Yet, for the most part, it certainly delivers the goods. It remains one of the most enjoyable films of its period, if not one of the most stylish. (Follow-ups rarely equal their inspiration, but "DR. X" and its successor were the exceptions to prove the rule. The 1933 "Mystery of the Wax Museum" again with Atwill-Wray-Curtiz, was one of the classics of screen horror, and was masterly in its use of color. This, unfortunately, DOES seem to be quite permanently unavailable. No negative or print is known to exist in this country, and the print that I saw several times in London between 1944 and 1950, was destroyed there in 1955 due to encroaching decomposition.)

Effective as it is in black-and-white, "DR. X" must have been quite marvellous in its original two-color Technicolor. Certain effects, shadow work, the moon shots, and above all the really grim climax, suggest that it may have been almost as creative in its use of color as was the subsequent "Mystery of the Wax Museum". Oddly enough, it is black-and-white history relates back to its original release. When, after press-shows in Technicolor, it was released largely in b/w, color prints being reserved solely for key opening spots, one wonders why has remained a mystery, unless some kind of damage to the American negative prevented wholesale printing, and release commitments did not allow for delays while a fresh dupes negative was made. It seems hardly logical.

In any event, "DR. X" is a grand thriller of the old school, replete with clutching hands, a weird laboratory, a hooded villain, gas jets, secret panels and the whole works -- including a wonderful group of suspects for the hidden villain. (Anyone who hasn't guessed his identity within 25 minutes deserves to be drummed out of the Film Society ... but guessing WHO still doesn't mean knowing WHY, so suspense is still maintained.)

Most of the action takes place in a wonderfully spooky old mansion atop a cliff at Gloucester, Long Island? It's based on a play, and occasionally shows it -- especially in some of the protracted (if still funny) comedy relief. But so much happens, the settings are so fascinating, and the dialogue from Tracy so snappy, that it never slows down to a stately walk. And (unlike today's so-called horror films) while it doesn't pull its punches in the gruesome scenes, there's no blood, no gore, no emphasis on the physically repellant.

And of course, in this kind of a show, who better than Pat Wray and Lionel Atwill, both on top of their considerable forms? Miss Wray, here on the threshold of being chased twice more by Atwill and once a pie by King Kong and Count Zaroff, makes a most appropriate entrance. Within two frames of appearing in her first scene, she lets out a piercing scream! And Lionel... with what zest and aplomb he delivers all of his meaty lines. How his eyes light up when a false scientist tells him that he is "on the verge of the secret of life", or when he delicately hesitates before telling the police that Dr. X, so-and-so is beyond reproach -- but for that one slight lapse in taste when he apparently descended to cannibalism? But nothing can sum up the good humored horror of the whole thing better--than the classic scene in which a doctor removes his artificial arm before the shocked gaze of the police. Like a teacher ushering his infant charges on to the next exhibit in the aquarium, Lionel cheerfully announces "Come along gentlemen, there are many more interesting things to see!"

- Intermission -

(Note: the later "Return of Dr. X" with Humphrey Bogart is in no way a sequel to this film)
"HELL'S ANGELS" (UA-Caddo-1929/30) Produced and directed by Howard Hughes Story by Marshall Neilan and Joseph Moncure March; musical arrangement by Hugo Riesenfeld; photography by Tony Gaudio, Harry Perry, E. Burton Steene, Don Malkames, Elmer Dyer, Harry Zech, Dewey Wrigley; Sets: Julian Boone-Felming, Carroll Clark; Dialogue Supervision: James Whale; Wrigley and company.


Original Length: 34 reels Length of this print: 26 reels.

The whole story of the filming of "Hell's Angels" - of its fantastic cost, of its conversion to sound when talkies came in, of the mishaps and disasters (when babies were killed during its shooting) and of the incredibly involved special effects, is a fascinating one that it's a pity to skim over it. So, for those interested, we recommend personal or a long and detailed article on the film in the November issue of "Cavalier". Although ostensibly written by Hal Term, it seems to have referred back to a contemporary "Photoplay" article for the bulk of his information. In any event, it's an excellent well-researched place to start.

As a film, HELL'S ANGELS stands or falls by its action and spectacle. Wisely, it stays in the air most of the time (unlike most later serial films, which often tend to themselves to death - especially Neilman's recent flasico "Lafayette Escadrille"), and its fantastic stunt work, acrobatics, spectacular dives and crashes, all superbly photographed and expertly matched in with the best of miniatures (the dirigible is a miniature, but so well done that the illusion of size is perfect), still represent by far the best thrill stuff of its kind ever put on film, certainly topping the quite considerable achievements of "Wings". ("Hell's Angels" serial footage dropped up a lot as stock in quickies of the early 30's - via "Grimm Romance", excerpts from which were shown on our "Stock Shot" program a few months back).

The non-serial elements of "Hell's Angels" are typical Howard Hughes. There is a delightful element to Jean Harlow but quite unnecessary sex element. The plot is novel in the extreme, much more so than "Wings", which was merely superficial in its plotting. Once in a while a dialogues exchange rings a little truer than the rest, and the English accents sound authentic, and one suspects that this was a sequence that James Whale handled. (Whale was then fresh from "Journey's End"). But the plot elements don't matter too much; it's all just so much spectacle to introduce or sustain the characters on whom the tale is hung. The air footage is all that matters - and once it gets into the air, it stays there for two and three reels as a time.

The print, as we warned in our bulletin, is far from ideal. It's a reverse dupes, and a lot of the pictorial quality is gone. Some of it is too dark, but interest in the film is so high, and it's such a rarity, that we feel sure you'll agree that an inferior print is far better than none at all. Even if some of the outstanding pictorial clarity is gone, enough is left so that one can well imagine how this looks in a pristine 35mm print. And if the sound track is a little muddy here and there, bear with it - in a few minutes they'll stop talking and take off to fight it out, in sportsmenlike fashion, with Baron Richtofen's Flying Circus!

This print, being duped from a British reissue print (but so that it could be double-billed) is missing quite a lot of footage, mainly of the "plot" rather than the "action" variety. Missing entirely is the opening sequence in Germany, wherein Ben Lyon dailies with a German officer's wife, rides out, and leaves James Hall to fight a duel on his behalf. (The officer is Lucien Prival - hence the "so we meet again" at the end). Missing are the scenes in which the zeppelin crew stages a revolt to lighten the weight of the ship, although these scenes were in a couple of odd 35mm reels that we ran at the New Yorker on one of our Sunday shows about a year ago. Also missing is the balloon sequence, originally in Technicolor, and the first sequence to be cut on reissue. These are the basic cuts, although there are certainly others. However, all the air action-spectacle remains, and what magnificent stuff it is. Let's hope that one of these days Hughes will reissue the whole film in all its pristine, 35mm glory - preferably with all the original color and sound. Although I suspect even he may be asked to remove the impromptu "Goodbye" that creeps into one of the aerial battles!

W.K. Eversen

Next program - Tuesday December 12th

TAXI (Roy Del Ruth) with James Cagney, Loretta Young, Frank Capra, George Raft, THE DARK HORSE (Alfred E. Green) with Warren William, Bette Davis, Guy Kibbee