"THE GAY DESPERADO" (United Artists, 1936) Produced by Mary Pickford and Jesse L. Lasky; directed by Rouben Mamoulian; written by Leo Birnkrant, screenplay by Wallace Smith; cameraman Lucien Andriot; art direction, Richard Day; Musical Direction, Alfred Newman; Nine reels


Unlike "Love Me Tonight", which more than lives up to its reputation, "The Gay Desperado" will inevitably disappoint those (and there are many) who constantly refer to it as a "lovely film" but who haven't seen it since its original release. The fault is hardly the film's; it was never a top-notch film, and it has dated hardly at all -- it remains as good today as it was in 1936. But originally its success, not only here but also in Europe, was so grand that it must have surprised even its makers. Perhaps because '36 and '37 were basically pretty barren years (Marlin and Astaire-Rogers notwithstanding) its easy-going charm found especially receptive audiences. But that charm, plus its relaxed pace and deliberate filminess, make its behavior in four earlier years, Mamoulian had backed up those virtues with names like Chevalier and Ruggles, and music by Rodgers and Hart. That was all over. Films in the same spirit could still be made, but they were no longer as important; no studio would allocate the same kind of budget to such a production. (Howard V. Lee's "One Rainy Afternoon", also made by Pickford-Lasky, is an enjoyable example of the same kind of compromise -- just missing being a real dud because it offers Lederer for Chevalier, and Lee for Lubitsch.) Although there is no lovely number, "The Gay Desperado" does lack a tuneful score; Nino Martini is pleasant enough, but remains a singer pulling off his negligible acting chores well enough, but without the assurance of a Chevalier; the sets are solid enough, but the economy shows.

When all is said and not discounting the loveliness of Ida Lupino, Rouben Mamoulian's is and done is the only outstanding talent in the film. And it is a pleasure to be able to recognize it constantly as a Mamoulian film, unlike many of his works (and especially "Golden Boy"). Visually, it is frequently charming, and obviously Mamoulian has gone out of his way to make the pictorial aspect a dominating one. The Mexican landscapes, vistas, sombrerises, galloping horses -- all these are fairly commonplace ingredients for visual images, yet Mamoulian seems to give them new life, as in that tremendously exhilarating long shot of Martini shouting for joy, dwarfed by two giant cactus plants. And Martini's shadow-shrouded song before the firing squad reminds one of Chevalier's "Apache" number from "Love Me Tonight". Other shots too are nicely framed and composed, and there are many exceptionally good closeups throughout.

But disappointingly, the script fails to make the most of the wonderful basic idea -- Mexican bandaits, influenced by Hollywood movies, trying to ape Chicago gangsters. The opening, with the bandits watching "Scarface" in awe and admiration, is a fine bit of satire; but like the similar opening to Jacques Tati's "Jour De Fete", it seems to exhaust its comic ideas almost immediately. There are mild jibes at American gangsterism later -- Stanley Fields, playing for laughs the character he played straight in "City Streets" has an assistant la George Raft in "Scarface", coin-filching and all a less charming than not bad -- but this side of the film lacks bite. Even the possibility of a bawdly sex scene, which (the heroine is, after all, kidnapped by a gang of singularly uninhibited desperadoes) is completely ignored. But all in all, "The Gay Desperado" disappoints only when one wonders what it might have been, or compares it to the great earlier Lubitsch and Mamoulian films. It is still a thoroughly enjoyable film, and often a very good one; and above all, it is a Mamoulian film throughout.

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INTERMISSION

"THE MARK OF ZORRO" (20th Century Fox, 1940) Directed by Rouben Mamoulian; based on "The Curves of Capistrano" by Johnston McCulley; screenplay by Carret Ford and Bess Meredith; photographed by Arthur Miller, Nine reels

The Sea Hawk" from Warners excepted, few of the swashbucklers of the early 40's were worth very much -- especially those from Fox, at that time one of the dreariest of all film factories. Mamoulian's "The Mark of Zorro" however is very much an exception, and a surprisingly under-rated film; not only did it mark a return to the director's long abandoned style of pictorial elegance, but it was in itself a first-rate example of how to make this kind of adventure fare -- seriously written and directed (yet not pompous, and still fun), intelligently acted, and backed by really solid production values. Perhaps the biggest obstacle of all was the acceptance of Tyrone Power in an old Fairbanks role. At the time, it seemed almost blasphemous; now, when Power himself seems almost like one of the old guard, one can approach his performance with less prejudice. True, his "top" scenes lack much of the humour that Doug gave them (and that Errol Flynn could have given them), but any such comparison is in any case unfair. There was only ever one Doug. And in any case, his "Zorro" was far more of a foplo. Although a less imposing production, I still have a natural preference for Doug's original -- but I don't think there can be much doubt that Mamoulian's film is infinitely better than the second Fairbanks opus, "Son Q, Son of Zorro." (The 40's saw the start of a rash of "Zorro" serials at Republic. "Zorro's Fighting Legion" was reasonably good and in the right spirit; the others were just routine westerns. Republic also offered a color feature, "The Bold Caballero," with Bob Livingston as Zorro. More recent Zorros have included Guy Williams in Disney's series, and Walter Chiari in a surprisingly good Italian spoof). Fairbanks and serial fanatics have accused this "Zorro" of being lax in action; what they probably mean is that it is lacking in acrobatic stunts and climactic serial-like action. For once, it is all to the good. Mamoulian's film certainly has enough action, with all the requisite chases and a brilliantly done duel towards the end. This episode combines real thrills with a lively sense of humor, the latter so pronounced that the death of the villain comes as somewhat of a shock. For the rest, the film is stately and well-mounted, beautifully photographed (with some first-rate class shots and other effects) and backed up by some excellent sets. The Zorro figure gives Mamoulian an ideal chance to play around with some of his shadow effects, and there are many other typically joyous little touches: the sleeping Mexican, for example, huddled down in his bed with his brown corabrocos, looking up briefly as Zorro gallops past. And the cast, with just about every Fox stock player represented, and every pen and vaquero on the lot, is a delightful reminder of old friends. It's rather a nice gesture too that Mamoulian brings back Charlie Stevens from the original to do a good scene with Eugenie Pallette. Rathbone of course is in his element in this kind of villainy (the lack of doubles for him and Power in the duel is quite surprising), and Linda Darnell what a beautiful creature she was in those days -- is even an improvement on the rather stolid Marguerite de la Motte. 

COMING PROGRAMS: All at Adelphi Hall 
Friday March 2nd: JOHN BARRYMORE, Dolores Costello, "THE SEA BEAST" (1926) 
Tuesday March 13th: Abel Gance's J'ACCOUCHE (1930); Von Sternberg's THE SCARLET EMPRESS (1934) with Marlene Dietrich. 

COMING in March and April 
... HIS PICTURE IN THE PAPERS (Fairbanks) 
START OF THE PARADE (Johnnie Walker) 
... PETER IBBETSON (Cooper, Ann Harding) 
PARIS MOUNT ON PARADE; KLOSENSKИE ARMS (Rus West) 
ISLAND OF LOST SOULS (Douglas Fairbanks, Bella Lugosi) 
... BORN TO SLEEP (Johnny Hines) 
... THE MAMOULIAN INDEX: An expected, pressure of work has delayed this. Also, we have been promised his SONG OF SONGS, HIGH WIDE AND HANDSOME and -- hold your breath and light a candle for it -- DR. JERKELL & MR. HYDE! So we are holding off temporarily pending reappraisal of these films. If these three do come through, with BECKY SHARP we'll have another Mamoulian cycle in the offing for the very near future, and if not Ready before then, the index will certainly be issued at that time. 

GEORGE CANNAM 

One of our most devoted members, and a good friend of many of you, is at present quite ill at Christ's Hospital, Jersey City, N.J. We've been in contact with him, and we hope to see him again soon -- but in the meantime of course he misses the society and his many friends here. I'm sure that he'll be most grateful to any of you who could spare the time to drop him a postcard or a short note -- but he's on a strictly supervised diet, so please don't emulate Laurel in "County Hospital," who took his friend Mr. Hardy a bag of hard-boiled eggs and nuts!