
Perhaps the best of at least three film versions of Arnold Bennett's "Buried Alive" (there was a silent one with Lionel Barrymore, and a 40's remake with Gracie Fields and Monty Woolley under the title "Holy Matrimony"), "His Double Life" is a charming and relaxing little trifle. Today, Arnold Bennett, Alice Duerr Miller and James M. Barrie (Disney's upcoming live remake of "Peter Pan" excepted) are forgotten figures insofar as the movies are concerned; there is nothing of the "blockbuster" about their work, they don't lend themselves to "B" pictures any more, and television adaptations rarely seem to succeed. This is the kind of film that could really only have been made well in the thirties. It's a civilized little work that offers pleasant people, an interesting little story, amusing chuckles, and above all, charm. Lillian Gish, in her second talking role (and her last one for a long time) is thoroughly delightful, if a trifle too gracious to be really convincing as the sensible middle-bracket Englishwoman. (There really isn't such a bracket in actuality; one has Gladys Cooper at one end of the scale, Gladys Henson at the other, and a rather depressing void in between). But why quibble, when it is such a pleasure to see Miss Gish perform? Roland Young too, seems unable to put a foot wrong in this kind of thing.

Not that "His Double Life" is all plain sailing. Some comedy bits misfire, and the trial scene, with its hints of fantasy and attempts to go Lubitsch, just isn't as clever as it thinks it is. But the lines are bright, the pacing fast, and the London backgrounds generally convincing. Certainly the whole film has a very British air to it all, the more remarkable since it was shot in Paramount's Long Island Studios, without the aid of exterior locations. Directorially, it is probably almost a one-man show by Hopkins; Miss Gish recently remarked that she didn't recall ever doing any scenes for DeMille. (Production stills do show all three together however). It's probable that DeMille performed for Hopkins as Gasnier did for Cukor on "The Virtuous Sin", solving the purely mechanical problems, and leaving the basic direction to the other. This was Hopkins' first film, and it works best in the scenes where the real pros - Gish and Young - are playing together in basically stagey set-ups. When it gets away from the leads and indulges in cinematic of its own, it occasionally falters a little. But all in all, it's an extremely pleasing little film, and not the least of its pleasures is a lovely musical score.

- intermission -

"The Bitter Tea of General Yen" (Columbia, 1933) Directed by Frank Capra

"The Bitter Tea of General Yen", one of the most interesting of Capra's early-30's films, comes from the middle of his "transition" period. The pure comedies and the pure adventure yarns had been abandoned, although elements of both were to continue to be conspicuous in his work. His
prior film, "American Madness", was his first really serious "social" essay; his next, "Lady for a Day", was to be a near-classic blend of whimsy, comedy and pathos. In between came "The Bitter Tea of General Yen", a very untypical Capra film, foreshadowing his "Lost Horizon" perhaps in its opening and in its general framework, and more than a little derivative of Josef von Sternberg's "Shanghai Express". Perhaps because it is difficult to discuss it "conveniently" in the sum total of Capra's work, it is comfortably forgotten -- or, if remembered at all, recalled largely as the film that had the honor of opening the Radio City Music Hall in early 1932. (The film was actually produced in 1932, some months after "Shanghai Express").

Like earlier Capra films (in later years it wasn't necessary), it manages to look far more expensive than it really is. Sets cunningly magnify height and depth by clever design. Stock shots are used sparingly, but effectively. And the war scenes, never 100% convincing thanks to miniatures and back projection, are nevertheless rousing and exciting. Photographically it is a slick and imaginative job, a little more "arty" than we are used to from Capra, but its silhouette shots and gauze are probably also inheritances from "Shanghai Express". However, whereas Sternberg could be erotic with a wisp of silk or a beam of light, Capra has to go in for rather more obvious trappings -- a lush bathtub sequence, and an incredible, Freudian and quite startled dream sequence.

Inevitably, the film reflects a lot of the old "Yellow Peril" fears that were perhaps never more unrestrained than in "The Mask of Fu Manchu", wherein Karloff expressed the Oriental's creed as "kill all the white men and mate with their women!". Although a missionary to China, Barbara Stanwyck's heroine displays remarkably little tact, let alone common politeness, when she turns on her civilized captor with a snarled "You yellow swine!". Similarly, almost all of the other white characters are given to lines like "Trickery, treason and immorality -- that's the Chinaman!" or "Don't forget -- you're a white woman and he's a Chinaman!". Stanwyck herself has the punch-line however when, quite deadpan, she intones "The subtlety of you Orientals is much over-rated!"

For all of its surface action and melodrama, "The Bitter Tea of General Yen" soon sorts itself out into a quite stylish essay in sex conflict, with Stanwyck's heroine revealing, in her dreams, a desire to be possessed by the warlord, and the Chinaman himself scornful to stoop to such a solution as rape. Today of course, such a situation would be played for shock and sensation (with perhaps "added scenes" for a foreign version); here it all remains well within the bounds of tasteful erotica, and is the more effective because of it. Incidentally, apart from Sternbergian leanings, one can detect a little influence from the old master Gustav Machaty himself; at least one passionate embrace seems to have been copied bodily from "Extase".

For those not interested in either erotica or the Yellow Peril, there's the excitement of the surface action, the fascinating study of such decidedly off-beat Capra, and the always interesting character work of Walter Connolly.

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**COMING PROGRAMS**

Next Sunday at the New Yorker we will be showing THE KID FROM SPAIN, but since the children's shows (this Sunday, Flynn's "Robin Hood" in color, same print as at the Film Group recently) are continuing at least for the time being, we have to start earlier -- this Sunday at 9:00 a.m., and because of the length of the feature, probably no shorts with it. We'll catch up later on BLUE FOX, and other delayed shorts. Thus, Vidor's JACK KNIFE MAN can now also be confirmed for Sunday December 30th at 9:00 a.m.

NEXT TUESDAY: THE LAST PERFORMANCE (Veidt, '29) BRAVEHEART (Rod laRocque, '25)