

"THE LAST PERFORMANCE" (Universal, 1929) Director: Paul Fejos
From a story by James Ashmore Greelman; photographed by Hal Mohr;
edited by Edward L. Cahn and Robert Carlisle; art direction by
Charles D. Hall and Thomas F. O'Neill; supervising editor,
Maurice Fivar. Film also known as "Erik the Great". Length of
this print: 4½ reels; original length: 7 reels.

With Conrad Veidt, Mary Philbin, Leslie Fenton, Fred Mackaye, Gustav Partos,
Eddie Boland, William H. Turner, Anders Randolph, Sam de Grasse, George
Irving, Joseph Calleia.

Like "Broadway", another Paul Fejos film of this period (we played it some
five years ago), "The Last Performance" is really a triumph of style over
movie matter. Basically its plot isn't so far removed from the thick-ear
melodramatics of Stroheim's PRG quickie "The Mask of Dijon", but like
"Broadway" it has so much production polish and skilled application of
style -- a plethora of such application actually -- that it seems almost
important. Yet when style is all that a film has to offer, its bare bones
often show as much as when there is no style at all, which is why "The Last
Performance" never once approaches the greatness of another blood-brother,
E.A. Dupont's "Variety".

However, in these days when films have no style at all, it is a little
churlish to quibble over a film that is visually so elegant and rewarding.
The moving camera runs riot, the glass shots are perfection, the angles and
lighting bizarre and impressive. There's one fantastic, perfectly-timed
shot near the beginning when the camera starts moving in on a hotel entrance
from across an empty street, allows a car to pull up, passengers to alight,
car drive off, and then follows the passengers up the steps and into the
lobby, all without faltering or a change of pace!

As we took pains to announce, this is a condensed print. While the film
is undoubtedly hurt by the cutting, and while it's frustrating not to see a
complete print, at least this version would seem to be a fairly representative
sampling of the original. All its strengths and weaknesses are clearly
paraded, and I doubt that we would sum it up much differently were it
complete. Actually, not a great deal is missing, and this print is, I
suspect, not so much a condensation as a savage job. The sequences
that are there seem to be played in toto, and when there's a cut -- as in
the hero's entrance, as a burglar - it's such an obvious jump, with no
attempt to hide it - that it must have been made only because the footage
was so badly damaged as to be unplayable. Since silent Universals are
comparatively rare, we must be thankful for small mercies -- and we also
ask for your indulgence in the event of a break or two. We've put in a
lot of time repairing the print, but it is in brittle condition, and
accidents can't always be avoided.

Like Paul Leni's "The Man Who Laughs" of the year before, "The Last
Performance" (although to a lesser degree) seems to be made for Lon Chaney.
Although Veidt is physically more suave as a high-class theatre magician,
he doesn't quite manage the pathos that Chaney injected so effectively.
Nevertheless, it's a good performance, and Mary Philbin (who had played
opposite Veidt in "The Man Who Laughs") is again an enchanting if rather
lifeless heroine. (Only Griffith, in "Drums of Love", managed to get real
vivacity and sexuality into a Philbin performance). Poor Mary certainly
suffered emotionally at the hands of Veidt and Chaney in the late 20's, and
one wonders if it is mere coincidence that both Lon's Phantom and Conrad's
magician were named "Erik"?

The last sequence of the film rather abandons its visual elegance for what
appears to have been a rather static talkie sequence, which doesn't pay off

as well in this silent version, but which does at least allow Veidt to play his big scene uncowed by decor and shadow effects.

***** INTERMISSION *****

"BRAVEHEART" (Cecil B. DeMille-PDC, 1925) Directed by Alan Hale
 Adapted by Mary O'Hara from the play "Strongheart" by William deMille;
 photographed by Faxon Dean.
 With Rod la Rocque, Lillian Rich, Robert Edeson, Tyrone Power sr., Henry Victor, Jack Curtis, Arthur Housman, Frank Hagney, Chief Ni-Po Strongheart, Kenneth Gibson, Walter Long, Sally Rand. 5 reels; toned.

I haven't read William deMille's play "Strongheart", on which this film was based (the title was changed to avoid confusion with the vehicles of the dog star Strongheart), but knowing a little of deMille's work, I imagine that it had both thoughtful dialogue and sensitivity to offset the rather contrived and familiar nature of the plot. Certainly, few film versions of plays have turned their back as resolutely on the theatre as has this one, which stays almost entirely out of doors, and makes the very most of some extremely picturesque locations. Incidentally, the pleasing framing and balanced compositions of many of the exteriors are among the film's chief assets.

Rod la Rocque makes a surprisingly good Indian, but it is difficult to take the racial elements of the story seriously, since the situations are contrived, the bases loaded throughout, and in keeping with the prevailing movie codes of the time, even the hint of a kiss between Indian and white girl is avoided. So it is neither an important nor a really serious picture on Indian problems, and in compensation, manages to deliver a little of something for everyone -- mild commentary on racial intolerance, some jazz-age flavor, a big football game, romance, an Indian uprising, disgrace, and a good cliff-edge fight climax. If nothing else, it has variety and keeps on the move, although the editing is a little slipshod here and there. And one can't always blame the city slickers for poking fun at an Indian who wears as ridiculous a wig as la Rocque does here.

But on the whole it's a vastly enjoyable piece of program hoke, nicely played by a cast of old professionals, beautifully photographed, and always entertaining. It's full of surprises too, and one is a little taken aback by a rip-snorting Indian uprising of the old school right smack in the jazz age! Frank Hagney is the renegade Indian who wants Lillian Rich as his squaw, and it's rather ironic that in a pursuit sequence taken right out of "The Birth of a Nation", it's our old pal Gus - Walter Long - who is leading the cavalry to save Lillian's honor!

The continuity has some strange incongruities. La Rocque helps Lillian when her ankle is broken, and asks her to meet him the next day at Deer Leap. Deer Leap turns out to be a man-sized mountain, and Rod is quite heart-broken to find that his broken ankle girl-friend isn't on top to meet him -- although somehow, during the night presumably, she managed to scramble up there to leave a note saying that she had to go back to the city! But it's this kind of naive thinking, even applied to the serious problems of racism, that makes "Braveheart" rather endearing in its way -- and one of the better films in the not-too-distinguished directorial career of Alan Hale.

----- William K. Everson -----
 NEXT TUESDAY -- CHARLES LAUGHTON and CAROLE LOMBARD in "WHITE WOMAN" (1933);
 PAUL MUNI and ANN DVORAK in William Dieterle's "DOCTOR SOCRATES" (1935)

Good news for Nancy Carroll fans - "HONEY" (1930), directed by Wesley Ruggles, with Stanley Smith and Lillian Roth, is en route to us and will be shown in early March.
