Two Melodramas from the Thirties

"DA. SOCRATES" (Warner Bros., 1935) Directed by William Dieterle
Produced by Robert Lord; screenplay by Robert Lord and Mary G. McCall Jr.; from a story by W.R. Burnett; Art Director, Anton Grot; photographed by Tony Gaudio; edited by Raymon Dawson. 8 reels.


The fact that "Dr. Socrates" stars Paul Muni, who that same year appeared in "Black Fury", "The Story of Louis Pasteur" and "Border Town", and was directed by Dieterle, who the same year had made "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Story of Louis Pasteur", among others, gives the film today a certain aura of "class" that it doesn't warrant, and certainly didn't seek in those days. In those halcyon days that, unhappily, are gone forever, contrast players and directors were literally that, and did what they were told. An epic could be followed by a 56 minute melodrama, a 14 reel prestige special by a horror film. And if Meeh, Curtiz, Dieterle, Davis, Muni etc., made an occasional film that they felt was beneath them, then dozens of programmers - and the public at large - certainly benefited from their sacrifices. And in all fairness, under regimes like that, such directors as Michael Curtiz, William Wyler, Howard Hawks, William Dieterle and Archie Mayo made far better and more enjoyable movies than in their later, more autonomous days.

"Dr. Socrates" is a B plus (or A minus) programmer by any standards, no more important to Warners than a dozen others just like it -- "Bureau of Missing Persons", "Public Enemy's Wife" or "Special Investigator". If anything, Muni is a liability rather than an asset -- his ponderous, pretentious style only succeeds in making his character both unbelievable and unappealing, and he's hopelessly out-acted every time a real pro like Barton MacLane or Otto Harlan shares a scene with him. Muni surely is one of the most over-rated of all actors, and in this film certainly, any one of a dozen Warner contractees -- Donald Woods, Gordon Oliver -- could have done equally well or better.

But I hadn't intended to criticize "Dr. Socrates", only to establish its correct position as a standard programmer of the period. As such it is loads of fun, and extremely well done. The small town atmosphere is neatly etched in, and the supporting roles well played. Barton MacLane dominates every scene he's in with his careless bravado and second-nature sadism, and a lot of our favorite hooches from the thirties give him able support. The story moves along at a good clip, and there's a grand bank robbery and car chase in the old tradition, with machine guns indiscriminately blazing in every direction, and a rip-snorter of a gun battle for the climax. Incidentally, the film was remade by William K. Howard in the forties, under the title "Bullet Scare". It ran for a tight 50 minutes, and incorporated a lot of stock action scenes from this first version. Regis Toomey took over the Muni role.

The print is complete, but has some mildly annoying scratches hither and yon. However, we shouldn't be ungrateful; if it weren't for those scratches, this print mightn't have been "liberated" for our use tonight.

Incidentally, a minor mystery. June Travis is listed in the film's credits, but unless she had a mere bit and I was scribbling notes when she came on, she doesn't appear to be in the film. Nor is it listed in the film Daily's cast, or on her own biographies. She was a charming young miss who brightened many a Warner "B" of the period, and it seems unlikely that we'd miss those bright eyes of hers if she were in it. But -- astute viewing the second time around might discover her somewhere.

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INTERMISSION

"WHITE WOMAN" (Paramount, 1923) Directed by Stuart Walker
Screenplay by Samuel Hoffenstein, Gladys Lehman and Jane Loring from a story by Norman Reilly Raine and Frank Butler; photographed by Harry Flashbeck. 7 reels.

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With: Charles Laughton, Carole Lombard, Charles Bickford, Kent Taylor, Terry Kilbride, Charles Middleton, James Bell, Claude King, Ethel Griffies, Jimmy Dime, Noble Johnson, Marc Lawrence, Tetsu Komai.

The early '30's were rather curiously full of stories of steamy sex and unlikely triangles set in remote regions of the tropics; "Thunder Below" and "Red Dust" are other examples that come immediately to mind. "White Woman" also reminds one at times of various elements contained in "Island of Lost Souls" and "Seven Sinners" and even, coincidentally, of the much later Laughton-Lombard film "They Knew What They Wanted." But as a genre, this kind of thing belongs very much to the first few years of the talkies; when "White Woman" was remade by Kurt Neumann in 1939 as "Island of Lost Men" (with Anna May Wong, J. Carroll Naish and Anthony Quinn) the emphasis was shifted from sex to melodrama and action.

If "White Woman" never quite comes off, it's because it never decides finally in which direction it's going, or how seriously it should take itself. The credits give only a simplified idea of the story origins, and much of an old Stroehl script has been incorporated into it. (His original tale, entitled "Poto Poto", dealt with a prostitute called "Roulette Nisha" who worked on the river boats.) Laughton's role as Horace Trin, King of the River, merely adds to the overall confusion. At first he is entirely sympathetic, his role apparently an extension of the one he played in "The Old Dark House". And then suddenly he becomes a lecherous old soul, a sadist and a killer -- yet with such a cherubic twinkle in his eye, and with such rich lines of dialogue, that one can't help but continue to be on his side.

It's Laughton's film all the way, and poor Carole Lombard doesn't stand a chance. She looks ravishingly beautiful, rarefied decorously, and is a real tantalizer in her proto-Garbo white blouse. But she seems to be in the wrong height of her Garbo period here, and gestures, intonations, mannerisms -- even the head thrown back -- are all so patently borrowed from Garbo that it's hard to take the poor girl seriously. Apparently realizing this, the director wisely gives her little of importance to do. She's the focal figure from which all the plot ramifications bounce -- but all the good lines are given to the salesmen, who know what to do with them. And there are some beauties: "Have you ever been wonderfully, inexcusably happy?" asks Kent Taylor, at the start of a gloriously over-written love scene played in a dance studio through giant lillies. And Charles Bickford, tipping off Laughton that he intends to seduce his wife, promises him "I've pushed bigger men than you out of bed without waking them!"

"White Woman" may be a pretty bad movie, but it's full of marvellously overblown melodrama from the days when realism was decidedly not the movies' main concern. The dramatic situations and lines are a joy, especially Taylor's description of his old fears (natives to teach his best friend's head through his window) and Lombard's religious consolation. The natives are properly put in their place by being constantly referred to as "the savages", and there's a classic bit of business involving Percy Kilbride's monkey which I won't spoil by describing. With its cheerful mixture of sex and melodrama, it's all quite a lark, and one wouldn't mind it being a bad film if it had a little more style to it. Von Stroheim could have made a thing of beauty of this; still absurd, but a stylish, elegant essay in pictorial exoticism. The camerawork has almost no style at all, and much of it looks almost casual -- as if they'd been winding away, picked up a few shots by chance, and figured they were just about good enough to use. But -- if you just sit back and watch Lombard, and watch and listen to Laughton (who, curiously, gets second billing) -- I think you'll still have quite a diverting evening.

I last saw this film when I was five years old, the year after its release. Doubtless much of the basic motivation escaped me then (at least, I hope it did!) but I recall being quite terrified by the jungle drums and the poison dart. It's not hard to see why. This aspect of it is cinematic, and still pays off; the last reel is grim, suspenseful, and more than a little shuddery. Perhaps because by that time Lombard had become a great star to be afraid of and to wed, and Walker and Flachbeck could settle down, belatedly, to making a movie.

COMING SHOWS: Next Sunday, New Yorker Theatre, 9:30. a.m. 35mm POT FOURS "WHISPERING WINDS" -- a rare example of the early part-talkie, Only 5 reels of an original 7 have survived, but the missing reels are interior ones. With Patisy Ruth Miller, Eve Southern, Malcolm MacGregor; music by Erno Rapee. Plus two episodes of THE HILL FOX, and odd reels -- hand-color, newsreel, etc.
Next Tuesday -- JOHN BARRYMORE IN RAPPLES (1917) and BULLDOG DRUMMOND COMES BACK (1937) directed by Wesley Ruggles. CAROLE LOMBARD, GARY COOPER. SHIRLEY TEMPLE in "HE'S JUST LIKE A WOMAN".}

EXTRA SHOW ON TUESDAY MARCH 5th
NANCY GARRISON in "HONEY" (1930) directed by Wesley Ruggles.
CAROLE LOMBARD, GARY COOPER. SHIRLEY TEMPLE in "HE'S JUST LIKE A WOMAN".

--We, K. Everson--