A Josef von Sternberg Program

DIshONORED (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Josef von Sternberg; screenplay by Daniel M. Rubin from a story by Sternberg; photographed by Lee Garmes; sets by Hans Dreier. 9 reels.


"Dishonored", the second American Dietrich-Sternberg film, is one of the least familiar (and least appreciated) of their seven films together. Dietrich's acting was improving steadily, and while the film was still deliberately slow-paced, there was a discipline and an order to the slowness which had been lacking in "Morocco". As with most Sternberg films, the characters and situations are absurd (although the larger-than-life climax is far more poignant and affecting than the lugubrious sentiment of the similar ending to Garbo's " Mata Hari"), but the sheer bravura style, the sets, the camerawork, the decor, the dialogue, all more than make up for any lack of logic.

Actually, if Victor McLaglen were more convincing as a master spy, and the Dietrich-McLaglen relationship was developed to a point where one could believe that their attraction was mutual and not mere sparring, "Dishonored" might well have had a far more solid dramatic foundation than most of the Sternbergs. But, regardless, it's a gorgeous piece of cinematic hokum, and pictorially a dazzler. Incidentally, most of the wartime action scenes during the montages are lifted from (primarily) "Hotel Imperial" with, curiously, a shot or two bought from "All Quiet on the Western Front" too.

- Intermission -

"THE SHANGHAI GESTURE" (UA, 1941) Presented by Arnold Pressburger; directed by Josef von Sternberg; associate producer, Albert de Courville; photographed by Paul Ivano; sets by Boris Leven; music composed and conducted by Richard Hageman; adapted by Josef von Sternberg, Geza Herczeg, Karl Vollmoller and Jules Furthman from the play by John Colton; 9 reels.


Though hardly top-bracket von Sternberg, "The Shanghai Gesture" was nevertheless the last authentic, vintage film from this colorful director. He may have been satisfied with his much later "Anatama" but few of his admirers were, and his last American films - "Mano" and "Jet Pilot" - regardless of interference and re-shooting by other directors, showed little of the old von Sternberg. For "The Shanghai Gesture", a good deal of credit should go to producer Arnold Pressburger, who in the early 40's had the wit and courage to give directors like von Sternberg, Rene Clair and Fritz Lang their heads in decidedly off-beat material. A notorious play, and a watered-down silent film, "The Shanghai Gesture" ran into inevitable scripting problems which von Sternberg side-stepped rather neatly. It may be a compromise of sorts to change Father God-Damn to Mother Gin Sling, and to disguise a brothel as a gambling, but it's not hard to read between the lines, and as a fascinating study in corruption and decadence, the film is still pretty hard-hitting stuff. And for 1941, when this kind of fare was temporarily quite alien to the screen, it was exceptionally strong meat. (Incidentially, the character of Dr. Omar was a useful invention of Sternberg's!) Pictorially the film, dominated by its marvellous gambling casino set, is always interesting; Osa Massen's makeup inevitably recalls Dietrich, the supporting players are well-cast (though some characters, such as a bartender burdened with Sternbergian philosophies and humor, fall a trifle flat), and Gene Tierney was never photographed better - nor did she ever again give such a good performance. Phyllis Brooks, too, usually wasted in B films, rises to Sternbergian direction extremely well.

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Comming Programs:

THE FILM GROUP: this coming Friday at 7:00, will offer the usual pot-pourri, including "The Making of a Western", George Mitchell's color documentary on the production of Edward Snaith's "Flash and the Spur"; John Bunny & Flora Finch in "A Cure for Hyperstasis"; "Dreams Men Die For", a fascinating one-hour compilation of Arctic exploration footage; etc.

NEW YORKER 35mm show next Sunday - 9:30 a.m. - THAT GIRL HON'TANA (1920, 5 rls) with Blanche Sweet; MABEL AT THE WHEEL with Chaplin and Mabel Normand; D.W. Griffith's AN ARCADIAN MAID with Mary Pickford; & 2 eps of TAUNTED HARBOR.

Next Tuesday - THE EAGLE & THE HANX with Gary Grant, Fredric March, Carole Lombard (1933), plus Laurel & Hardy's "Plotto", an outstanding new Polish short, "The Magician", and a bizarre WB cartoon, "Little Lion Hunter".

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WM. K. EVANS ---