Alice in Wonderland (Paramount, 1953) Directed by Norman Z. McLeod
Adapted by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and William Cameron Menzies from the book by Lewis Carroll; music by Dmitri Tiomkin; special effects by Gordon Jennings; photographed by Henry Sharp and Bert Glennon; masks and costumes by Wally Westmore and Kurt Jones; sets by Robert E. Coates; 8 reels


Of the handful of silent and sound screen versions of "Alice in Wonderland," none have been really successful in capturing the spirit of half-whimsy, half-surrealist nightmare that permeated the original. Most (especially Walt Disney's heavy-handed cartoon) have made the mistake of assuming it to be purely a children's story. And most too -- and this version is especially guilty in this regard -- have come to the odd conclusion that the original Alice needs jazzing up, and thus have fused the plot and characters with those of a second Carroll story, "Through the Looking Glass." Possessing the Anglo-French production with Carol Marsh, and produced by Lou Bimini, came closest to the original conception, though it looked charming.

This "Alice" is more fascinating than entertaining; the intelligent utilization of certain players (notably Fields, Ruggles and Horton) and the shameless wasting of others (many not even recognizable behind their masks); the bizarre sets; the often interesting trick camerawork, with the deliberately non-matching sizes; all of these purely academic aspects tend to obscure far more interest than the material itself. Basically this is a rather bawdy and ugly Alice, sometimes appropriately so, but more often unintentionally so. It hints at the kind of an Alice we might get if Bunuel or Clouzot were to tackle the subject, and thus with its overall ugliness it is not an inappropriate companion feature to "Les Enfants du Feu". Occasionally there are moments of quite genuine horror, and the insane, terrifying feast at the end serves the same effective wrap-up purposes as the final nightmare chase in "Dead of Night".

Mankiewicz's screenplay is an unimaginative, paste-and-scissors kind of job, and curiously he shares the credit with William Cameron Menzies. It seems unlikely that Menzies did much actual writing on the film, and it is more likely that he performed his usual "production designer" function while being prevented by some union or other red tape from using that title in the credits.

While the film is disappointing (and frustrating too, in not really delivering the all-star cast it promises) it is certainly not without interest, and occasional highlights that make for a good deal. Pictorially it has a great deal to offer, and some of the stars do come off beautifully. W.C. Fields is just great as Humpty Dumpty, a creature of bombast and anti-social utterances, filling the role as expertly as he did Maeberry in "David Copperfield". And Horton and Ruggles make of the Mad Hatter and the March Hare genuine Carroll creations -- with perhaps just a dash of Lubitsch! Charlotte Henry -- as was her So Peep in "Babes in Toyland" -- is a charming and innocent pivot around which most of the turmoil revolves. And Allison Skipworth makes a fearsome Duchess indeed -- accompanied by that menacing little fidget from the Busby Berkeley musicals. Here he turns into a pig; and one wonders, with dread and perhaps a little hope, if this isn't what really happened to him?

==Intermission==
When "Le Corbeau" was finally shown outside of Europe after World War Two, it aroused much the same storm as the more recent "Les Liaisons Dangereuses". Sponsored by Mr. Goebbels' propagandist film-producing machine (and one of the best films to emerge from it), it was supposed to convince other conquered nations of the degeneracy of the French — though all it did was inspire admiration that an occupied nation could still turn out such powerful cinema. But after the war, the French authorities felt that its original intent (the German intent that is, not necessarily Clouzot's) was still potent, and sought to suppress it. When they finally relented, the film evoked instant controversy and shock. It seemed outrageously ugly, squalid and revolting in detail; today revulsion and unpleasant physical detail has become commonplace in cinema that by comparison "Le Corbeau" is quite mild. However, this is surely a criticism of the degeneration of audience tastes rather than of the film itself. As a piece of cinema, it stands up well. It is perhaps not as honest a film as the earlier British equivalent, "Poison Pen"; for all its surface realism, Clouzot's film is far more divorced from reality. But it holds up much better as a piece of cinema. So much has been written about its (and Clouzot's) anti-social intentions that it is pointless to rehash them here; and the famous "symbolic" scene with the swinging lamp has likewise been so over-praised that one now almost resents this rather self-consciously clever episode.

Surprisingly, it now holds its own best as a simple piece of mystery hokum. There are as many red herrings and wrong suspects as in any old Mascot serial. And as in those serials, the identity of the "hidden villain" is as easy to guess. But knowing -- or thinking one knows -- the outcome doesn't lessen the effectiveness of the suspense, the occasional shock image or eerie evocation of the macabre out of the seemingly normal, or such merrily done bravo sequences as the nurse's mad flight through the streets pursued by a deafening chorus of mob screams.

"Le Corbeau" was only Clouzot's second film. His first, "L'Assassin Habite au 21" was a good if uneven thriller that has been sadly under-rated. "Le Corbeau" was a tremendous step forward, and in many ways an excellent film. But unlike so many directors whose best films are their first two or three (Welles, Mamoulian, Huston), Clouzot continued to learn and to improve. In the mid-40's, "Le Corbeau" was a startling film and heralded the arrival of a dynamic new director; almost twenty years later (it is frightening to realize how rapidly the 40's have receded into film history!) it is still a good film, but it can be seen in perspective to be a milestone, in Clouzot's career.

Incidentally, in 1951 Otto Preminger made an American version for Fox, under the title "The 13th Letter", with Charles Boyer, Linda Darnell, Michael Rennie and Francise Rosey. As such remakes go, it was quite a good job, and more satisfactory that other American remakes of such French films as "Le Jour Se Love", "Fanny", "Extenuating Circumstances", "Pigeon", "La Bete Humaine", etc.

COMING PROGRAMS

This Friday the Film Group meets here at 7:00 p.m. Program includes parts 2 & 3 of the Canadian documentary series "Between Two Wars", part one of which was shown at the HUff Society last week, Sammett's "A Sea Dog's Tale" with Billy Bevan, a new "Silents Please" etc. etc.

Next Sunday morning's 35mm show at the New Yorker will be a pot-pourri of oddities that have piled up. The complete Griffith-Mary Pickford AN ARGADIAN MAID (a reel was missing at our last show); Gaylord Lloyd in DODGE YOUR DOTS; a reel from the silent Joan Crawford-Fred Niblo DREAM OF LOVE, and other silent reels. To treasure this month, plus two ops of the talkie serial HAUNDED HARBOUR. Full list of final program will be available at the Film Grp on Friday.

Next Tuesdays Frank Capra's poignant and simple comedy-romance BROADWAY BILL, with Warner Baxter, Aynna Loy. Plus: Laurel & Hardy in OUR WIFE, and a delightful early talkie re-discovery -- Charlie Ruggles in a viciously womating two-reeled racer called THE HOT AIR MERCHANT.

We can now fill in one of our open July dates. July 23 will be a kind of "ladies' night" - Louise Brooks & Evelyn Brent in LOVE EM & LEAVE EM (25); Mary Pickford in Griffith's FEMALE OF THE SPECIES (1912); Pearl White in the last chapter of PERILS OF PAULINE; and Helen Holmes and Hoot Gibson in THE STOOPED SLEEPER (From "The Hazards of Helen")