"The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" (Nerofilm, 1922) Directed by Fritz Lang
Produced by Seymour Nebenzal; script by Thea von Harbou;
photographed by Fritz Arno Wagner; Art Direction, Karl
Vollbrecht; Emil Hassler; music: Oskar Brand; American
releasing version edited by Gregg Tallas; 8 reels
With Rudolph Klein-Rogge, Otto Wernicke, Gustav Dießl, Oscar Beregi,
Vera Liessem, Camilla Spira, L.A. Lloch, Karl Keimer, Theodore Loes,
Theo Lingen.

Lang made three German "Dr. Mabuse" films -- the last two semi-reluctantly,
since he dislikes remaking or reworking his earlier films, and for that
reason within recent years turned down proposed remakes on "Siegfried" and
"Metropolis". His recent "The Indian Tomb" was an exception in that he had
merely scripted the silent original, which had been directed by Joe May.

The first "Dr. Mabuse" (in 1922) had some marvellous sequences, but was
rambling, confused, and a trifle uneven, its best sequence -- a nightmare
drive to an open quarry, at top speed, while the driver was under hypnosis
was in a sense repeated, and improved upon, in "The Testament of Dr. Mabuse",
which was that rarity, a sequel superior to its original. The third Mabuse
film, "The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse" was a surprisingly vigorous and
stylish film for a film made in the sixties by a man in his eighties; we
showed it at this society a little over a year ago, but so far it has not
received an American release. Since then, Mabuse films have been almost
mass-produced by the German company that acquired rights to the Mabuse
character (he was the creation of a novelist, not scenarist von Harbou) but
Lang has not been involved in any of these.

"The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" became something of a cause-célèbre when it
was banned by Dr. Goebbels, and was promptly smuggled out of Germany, with
Lang making his escape at the same time. The reasons for this (we refer you
to Kraeauer's "From Caligari to Hitler" for more detailed rundown) were
its alleged anti-Nazi sentiments, and its placing of Hitler and Nazi slogans
into the mouths of Mabuse and his associates. However, just as it's unlikely
that the German moviegoers would have realised that Baum, with his dual
existence, was an extension of Caligari, it's even more unlikely that they'd
have recognised the film as a piece of propaganda against the New Order. All
that Dr. Goebbels really did was to deprive Germany of a wonderfully exciting
and eerie piece of melodrama -- still one of the best films that Fritz Lang
ever made, and a film that withstands time far better than the more "important"
"M".

It's interesting that just as Lang reused the chase from the first Mabuse in the
second, so does he reuse the murder in the car in this film in the third
Mabuse. (In fact, it is the method of murder that suggests to an old-timer on
the force that Mabuse is behind it!) And there is a link with "M" in that it is
the same rather stolid and methodical detective, Inspector Lohmann (Otto
Wernicke) who tracks down both the child murderer and Mabuse. Lang also
anticipates the popular melodrama cliches of the 40's and 50's in having his
mad master-criminal a devotee of rather grotesque modern art! (In Hitchcock's
"Saboteur" reference is made to a killer being caught at the Museum of Modern
Art too!)

Lang's Mabuse is a slightly less omnipotent villain than his own Maghi (from
"Spies" or than Fu Manchu, Dr. No and others of their breed, and thus
 correspondingly more convincing -- and terrifying. The film draws its roots
from the old serials perhaps, but it's no mere series of cheap thrills. It
builds steadily and methodically, almost to the same pattern as a Laurel and
Hardy comedy, heightening its suspense to fever pitch in the last third,
alternating horror sequences with more normal crime scenes so that the mood
is constantly changing, and finally and literally exploding into the nightmare
climax of sabotage, chase -- and, as in the first Mabuse film, a retreat into
insanity.

A French version was made simul taneously, also with Klein-Rogge as Mabuse,
but with Jim Gerald was Lohmann. I saw it once, and recall it as somehow
lacking the real nail-biting suspense of the German version. This version we
are showing tonight is, under the title "The Crimes of Dr. Mabuse", a
slightly cut and dubbed American version. The dubbing, for once, isn't bad
at all -- the dialogue used matches the original quite well, and the voices
and delivery of lines likewise correspond with the faces fairly successfully.
I think that Wernicke is dubbed by Gene Stutenroth, who not only talks like
Wernicke, but even looks like him! Dubbing is never wholly successful of

Early Talkies By Two Giants

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
February 25, 1964
course, too - much as one regrets not seeing the fuller version - is intelligent except for one monumental blunder at the very beginning. One can accept the meaningless attempt to update it all, by the narration that states that the records of the case were discovered in the rubble of post World War 2 Germany. But the marvellous original sequence of a man having sex in a noisy, shadowy, vibrating room - a perfect visualisation of the kind of "abys of terror", into which Mabuse (and the Nazis) plan to throw mankind - is minimised not by cutting, but by the addition of a line of dialogue which explaining quite casually (as the original didn't until much later) that the noise is caused by the counterfeited printing press of Mabuse's men.

For the rest however, the editing has tightened the film without removing any key scenes. I remember as a child of six being scared silly by this "Mabuse" - but also being rather bored by the lengthy and often convoluted footage in the earlier part of the film. It seemed to me (and I admit that recollections from childhood can be distorted and unreliable) that there were many long long scenes between hero and heroine as they discuss the ways and means of escaping Mabuse's net. Probably these weren't as long as I recall them - but there were certainly many more of such scenes than in this version, and if I recall correctly, the hero's first meeting with the heroine was also there in some detail. These seem to be the principal cuts; certainly all of the colorful underworld stuff, and the key thrill scenes, are untouched. I discussed the original length of this film with Lang about three months ago, and his reply was both honest and classic: "I always made my films long. That was so they couldn't put anything else on the same program, and I got all the money!"

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Intermission

"ABRAHAM LINCOLN" (United Artists-Joseph M. Schenck, 1930)

Directed by D.W. Griffith; photographed by Karl Struss; scenario by Stephen Vincent Benét; production designed by William Cameron Menzies; editor, James Smith; music - Hugo Riesenfeld; production supervision, John W. Considine Jr.

Production Assistants: Herbert Sutcho, Raymond Klune. 9 rls.


Despite a spate of revivals some eight years ago - brief showings at the 72nd St. Trans Lux, the 5th Avenue cinema, one at the NY Historical Society - it's surprising (from reaction to our announced showing) how many people have missed "Abraham Lincoln". I suspect that one of the reasons for the dearth of recent showings has been the lack of good 16mm prints. The original negative is now in very bad condition, so no new prints can be made up, and those that are in existence are often well used and usually incomplete. We have had several prints pass through our hands, none of them in good enough or complete enough shape to warrant showing. Today's print was carefully put together from three different prints to make one complete one. Because of this, the quality and generation is not constant, and since all three prints utilized were themselves well used, it still has its share of splotches and some incomplete scenes.

but at least it does now seem to be the only complete print available in the NY area on 16mm, and if we keep going that long, we'll probably dig it out of the Huffin vaults in another ten years for a repeat.

I said it was complete, but I should make very minor reservation. In England in 1945, one 35mm print turned up from nowhere and played a week in an obscure theatre near Paddington. The first day the print was in such bad shape that it didn't seem possible that it could hold out for a week. On the second day, it was still in bad shape - but in different shape. A reel had been dropped, and another substituted. It emerged that the theatre wanted just 80 minutes of playing time, and because of the bad shape of the film, was dropping reels at random and playing whatever could be fixed up. During the course of the week, I saw several different "versions" - and one scene, a fight on a lonely country road between Lincoln and an aggressive stranger (something like the Robin Hood-Friar Tuck battle by the stream) that I have NEVER seen in ANY subsequent print. But apart from that one elusive and mysterious episode, our print tonight is complete.
"Abraham Lincoln" was Griffith's first talkie (overlooking the minor use of sound in the prior "Lady of the Pavements") and was a big success in 1920. It was both a financial and critical success, and earned Griffith a critics award as the best director of the year. It was an ambitious project on which to experiment with his first talkie, and having pulled it off successfully, he seemed to have staged a major comeback. But the commercial disaster of his next film, "The Struggle" (seen today, it is quite fine and its complete failure is hard to understand) unfortunately nullified that comeback, and Griffith withdrew into retirement, returning to production only for the abortive "One Million B.C." in 1940.

Critical judgements of the very early sound period were often very curious. Films that were shunted aside then seem quite marvellous today, and films which prospered well then, often don't live up to them now. "Abraham Lincoln" really needs patience and an appreciation of Griffith to be fully enjoyed; it has many of the weaknesses of early talkies, and its slow, stiff, sometimes clumsy. But it is a tremendously sincere and deeply felt work; one is occasionally restless, but one never lacks respect for it.

Initially Griffith approached Carl Sandburg to write the script. When he declined, Benet took on the job -- but apparently he too, worked very much under Griffith's supervision, and much of the writing is more D.W. than S.V.B. It is perhaps the dialogue that dates most; much of it is far too coy, and the name-dropping and "cleriveness" of conveying history by a cute line, are sometimes irritating. But it would not have been irritating in 1930, when we hadn't gotten three decades of Hollywood "history" behind us, and the memory of endless coy and cute lines in "Suez", "Reign of Terror", "Woman of the Town" and so many others.

For all its faults, "Abraham Lincoln" was the first thoroughly and completely Griffith film since his transference to Paramount in the mid-20's. As a look at the cast will show, he had many of his old players with him, and many of his production associates too: Una Merkel plays like Lillian Gish. The compositions and images constantly recall former Griffith pictorialism. That lovely pastoral love scene between Lincoln and Ann Rutledge is as lovely as the one between the Lincoln and Mary Todd. The background score utilizes the broad, low key Old Church War tunes and marches. The figures in Lincoln's cabinet are a little more clearly defined than they were in "The Birth of a Nation", and if they seem a trifle too superfluous at times it is probably only because of the subsequent researches that have striven to implicate Stanton and even Grant in the assassination.

As in "The Birth of a Nation", Griffith is fair to both sides -- but still the old Kentuckian favors the South. Northern troops march off to war in an efficient, military manner; Southern troops, accompanied by "Dixie", do so to garlands of flowers and gallant kisses to Southern womankind!

But again, in its reconstruction of a period, it is almost faultless. One might quibble at details -- Booth does not trip and break his leg on the stage at this time, but Ian Keith's grandiloquent Booth is so effective it hardly matters. Physical action is limited, especially in the first half of the film where the slow pacing and rather obvious sound "effects" produces a theatricality, but the pace picks up in the war sequences. Even here, tableau scenes tend to predominates -- you visualize the vast, big spectacle sequence of Sheridan's Ride is out and photographed in the grand clausal style of old. True, it doesn't quite suggest the enormous body of men that rode with Sheridan and that Griffith doubtless would have loved to put on the screen -- but money was tighter in 1930 than when the Klan rode in 1915, and within its budgetary limits, it is still a splendid sequence. Just as, remembering that this was Griffith's first talkie, "Abraham Lincoln" as a whole is bigger than its individual parts, and still quite an impressive and rather touching movie. -- William K. Everson

NEXT WEEK is the one week hiatus we take in our two-month schedule in order to get the new programs lined up, fresh bulletins mailed out, etc. The March/April Bulletins will be mailed out a week from today.