The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

April 21, 1964

The End of the Silent Era: Two Films from 1929

"L'ARGENT" ("Money") France, 1929. Written and directed by Marcel L'Herbier; based on a novel by Emile Zola; camera: Kruger.

The Cast: Nicholas Saccard (Alcover); Gundermann (Alfred Abel); Baroness Sandorf (Brigitte Helm); Lina Hamelin (Mary Glory); Jack Hamelin (Henry Victor); Massias (Jules Berry); and Raymond Rouleau.

Attendees at the Museum of Modern Art's Saturday morning sessions some six years ago were all bowled over by a fascinating documentary (never shown publicly here, and long since returned to France) on the making of "L'Argent". Like Hollywood's "Broadway" of the same year (which we showed a few months ago) "L'Argent" was thoroughly obsessed with the moving camera, and the documentary showed how some of the amazing photographic effects were achieved with a minimum of expensive equipment and a maximum of initiative. The camera was trundled about on every conceivable kind of vehicle, was mounted on a variety of platforms, and for the remarkable overhead shots of the stock exchange, was literally thrown out of a window on a cord! That documentary record, and this abridged print, are all that is left of what must have been quite a wonderful production, since the Cinematheque in Paris states that neither print nor negative of the original are still in existence over there.

This print, condensed to an hour, makes one's mouth water for all the missing footage, as well as keeping one hopping mentally in an effort to keep up with the complex and fast-moving story - something of a bizarre and more complex "Executive Suite". However, the condensation has been done with care and respect like most of the British 9.5mm releases of the early thirties, many of which were cut by David Lean. Just how well - and affectionately - these films were edited was proven by the Museum's recent Hitchcock cycle, where several of the films shown had been screened by this society earlier in the heavily abridged 9.5mm form. Films like "The Manxman" and "The Ring" were found to contain in their shortened version not only faithful treatment of the story-line, but also all the best individual sequences and shots, many of which would automatically have been dropped had the editor just taken the easy way out. This is not to defend or condone such severe cutting per se; but based on the experience of those and other films where we have been able to see both versions, I think we can say that these British condensations do provide reliable and valuable cross-sections of the originals, and that conclusions and critical comments we may make about the shortened versions probably apply equally well to the full prints. Physically, this print leaves a little to be desired since it is a blow-up to 16mm from 9.5mm, and thus a trifle soft and grainy in spots. But on the whole, it is of above-average standard for such a procedure.

The cast is particularly interesting, with Brigitte Helm (sensuous as ever, writhing like a silver-scaled fish in one exotic scene) and Alfred Abel, both graduates of "Metropolis", joining the French players. Jules Berry, reputedly in his first film role, has little more than a bit. Like all of L'Herbier's films, "L'Argent" is odd, unpredictable, and thoroughly absorbing, decidedly off-beat in writing and direction, often bizarre in decor, and a curious mixture of the real, the unreal and the exaggerated. Apart from his quite brilliant and neglected "La Nuit Fantastique" (1942), L'Herbier's later work was less interesting, with a stress on talkative comedies and occasional rather dull spectacles. His mediocre "The Last Days of Pompeii" was made even less exciting in the U.S., by some awful dubbing and the deletion of some ten reels of footage.
"THE IRON MASK" (UA-Fairbanks, 1929) Directed by Allan Dwan; adapted from the Dumas stories "The Three Musketeers" and "20 Years After" by Elton Thomas (Fairbanks); assistant director, Bruce Humberstone; camera: Henry Sharp; music: Allan Gray; narration written by Richard Llewellyn and spoken by Douglas Fairbanks jr. 8 reels

The Cast: D'Artagnan (Douglas Fairbanks jr); Constance (Marguerite de la Fotte); The Queen Mother (Belle Bennett); Lady de Winter (Dorothy Revier); DeRochefort (Ulrich Haupt); Madame Peronne (Vera Lewis); Louis XIll (Rolfe Sedan); Louis XIV and his twin (William Bakewell); Cardinal Richelieu (Nigel de Brulier); The Young Prince, and his twin (Gordon Thorpe); Father Joseph (Lon Poff); Planchet (Charles Stevens); King's valet (Henry Otto); Athos (Leon Bary); Porthos (Stanley J. Sandford); Aramis (Gino Corrado)

Not seen even in this "modernised" version for many years, it is longer still since the original was shown, and one hopes that one of these days the MMA will see fit to schedule it again. Actually however, this slightly streamlined version treats the original with respect, and the changes and re-arrangement of footage are minor. Doug always loved titles -- lots of them, and long ones -- so their elimination in favor of narration reduces the footage quite spectacularly without losing any incident. In order to make occasional narrative points, or to have picture match a line, some minor optical juggling has been undertaken. For example, one closeup of the man in the iron mask, peering from his cell window, is actually a blow-up from a longer shot. To obtain longer exteriors of this prison, some shots have been run in reverse as well as forward -- with the rather unfortunate effect that a river suddenly stops flowing in one direction and flows back whence it came! How this wasn't spotted is beyond me. But otherwise the tampering is at a minimum, and the only other changes are improvements. One linking scene towards the end as the Musketeers gather -- a rider galloping down a country road -- is borrowed from the original "The Three Musketeers". And there is one wholesale shifting of a sequence. Originally, Marguerite is killed off at the mid-way point, and Doug, apparently unhappy at the idea of having no heroine in the latter part of the film, devised a flashback scene in which he recalled happier days with Constance. Since it was too long and too light-hearted a comic sequence to be a mere nostalgic vignette, it quite upset the balance of the whole film. In this later treatment, the sequence is used earlier, in its appropriate context, and works far better. The narration spoken by Fairbanks jr. is appropriate and in the right spirit, limiting itself to narrative only, and never going "outside" the story for footnotes. The music too is excellent. It's a pity that the Odyssey Corporation didn't devote the same kind of care and budget to the successors, "The Black Pirate" and "The Gaucho", which in their new treatment were considered inadequate for theatrical reissue, and found a limited tv market only.

"The Iron Mask", despite a limited use of sound, was both Doug's last silent -- and his last swashbuckler. Perhaps because of this "farewell" aspect, and because in it Doug died for the first time on the screen (other than in the comic prologue to "The Mollycoddle"!), it was less tongue-in-cheek than its immediate predecessor and taken more seriously. For once Dumas tended to come out ahead of Doug! And Doug, probably conscious of age and sensitive to it, seems to have shunned closeups. The result is that the film, shot largely in long and medium shots, seems much earlier than 1929. Nevertheless, it's a good swashbuckler, perhaps all the better for being taken so seriously. The climax certainly is very movingly done, with good, honestly unrestrained sentiment -- and for the rest, the stunts, the duelling and the comic camaraderie are sufficiently in the established Fairbanks tradition to keep his admirers well satisfied. As always, the villainy is particularly formidable, and Ulrich Haupt makes a wonderful DeRochefort.
Although certainly not a cheap picture, "The Iron Mask" was probably Doug's most "economical" swashbuckler since "The Mark of Zorro" -- and some of its best effects were the easiest to obtain. The dramatic and strikingly-lit scene (with the giant shadows) where the young King is kidnapped and placed in the mask suggests a large and very substantial set, and extremely intricate lighting arrangements. A production still of that scene however shows that the whole set consists just of flooring and a couple of simple cardboard flats, while the shadow effects are achieved solely from one light placed at an angle in a shallow pit below camera level.

"The Iron Mask" was not only Doug's last swashbuckler, but the last of its genre for quite a while. Swashbucklers were conspicuously absent from the screen in the early 30's, and when they returned in the mid-30's, it was with the milder, more talkative Dumas of "The Count of Monte Cristo", and the seagoing action of Sabatini in "Captain Blood". True, there was a "Three Musketeers" from RKO in '37 -- but Walter Abel, playing D'Artagnan like a divorce-court lawyer, must have made Doug put his finger to his nose in that classic gesture from his "Three Musketeers" when he overhears Richelieu's plotting!

However, with Flynn's "Robin Hood" and James Whale's remake of "The Man in the Iron Mask" in 1939, swashbucklers got back on their feet a little, soon, alas, to become a staple and rather uninspired commodity. However, Whale's film had much to recommend it, despite a script that distorted Dumas -- and history -- quite spectacularly. Like all Edward Small films, it was cheaply budgeted. And like all Whale films, it had such flair and style that the budget hardly showed. The only big scenes in the film were stock shots lifted from Doug's picture; for the rest, cunningly angled shots made small sets look big, and glass shots made tolerably big sets look huge. It was an enjoyably done romp, with Warren William a surprisingly good D'Artagnan.

Today, "The Iron Mask" automatically fuses Doug and D'Artagnan into one personality, and thus the tragic -- yet not unhappy -- climax is especially poignant. Five pictures and nine years later, Doug was to follow D'Artagnan into the final adventure; and one almost feels -- or would like to feel -- that the closing scenes apply as much to Doug personally as they ever did to Dumas' hero.

--- William K. Everson ---

THIS PROGRAM IS OUR LAST AT ADELPHI HALL. NEXT TUESDAY'S PROGRAM (DISASTER, STUNT MEN & SPECIAL EFFECTS) AND ALL PROGRAMS THEREAFTER WILL BE HELD AT THE ACADEMY HALL AT BROADWAY AND 14th STREET. FULL DETAILS OF THIS AND OF ALL MAY-JUNE SHOWS ARE CONTAINED IN OUR NEWS BULLETIN FOR THOSE MEMBERS WHICH IS AVAILABLE TO YOU THIS EVENING AND WHICH OF COURSE IS BEING MAILED TO ALL MEMBERS NOT PRESENT THIS EVENING.