

Next Tuesday, Sept. 22nd: Korda and the Fairbanks: "THE PRIVATE LIFE OF DON JUAN" (1934) with Doug sr., and Raoul Walsh's "JUMP FOR GLORY" (1937) with Doug jr.

Tuesday Sept. 15 1964

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A Program of Mystery & Detection: Fox, 1939

"Mr. Moto Takes A Vacation" (20th Century Fox, 1939) Dir: Norman Foster  
Pro: Sol M. Wurtzel; Screenplay by Philip MacDonald and Norman Foster;  
Camera: Charles Clark; editor, Norman Colbert. 6 reels  
With Peter Lorre, Lionel Atwill, Joseph Schildkraut, Virginia Field, John King, Iva Stewart, George P. Huntley Jr., Victor Varconi, John Bleifer, Anthony Warde, Harry Strang, John Davidson, Morgan Wallace, William Gould, Willie Best, The Honorable Wu, Jimmy Aubrey, Gino Corrado.

The last of the surprisingly short-lived mystery series based on J.P. Marquand's Japanese detective hero (there were eight films over a two year period), "Mr. Moto Takes A Vacation" maintains quite remarkably the high standard of the whole series. I say "remarkably" because usually the last film in any "B" series turns out to be the weakest in that series, not just because the freshness and enthusiasm has gone, but more realistically because there just isn't too much percentage in trying too hard. Exhibitors don't have to be re-sold on the next series, and its grosses will be the same whether it costs \$40,000 or twice that much. The climactic entries in "B" westerns and thriller series invariably had weaker casts than usual, lesser production values, and often much padding via a reel or so of stock footage - viz "Bulldog Drummond's Bride".

"Mr. Moto Takes A Vacation" is the welcome exception to prove the rule however. While it isn't on quite the same (comparatively) elaborate scale as the earlier films in the series, it's still a handsome looking little film, and a well-cast one too. If not up to top standard, it is also a long way from being the weakest in the series, a distinction that probably belongs to "Mr. Moto On Danger Island". The only sign of economy, and it's a misleading one in films of this type, is in the running time. At 61 minutes, it is the shortest film in the series.

The Motos were so superior to the Chans in every way that one can only surmise that they were discontinued because they depended so largely on Lorre's personality, and no adequate replacement could be found when he decided he wanted to abandon the role. Initially the Motos went into production only because the sudden death of Warner Oland brought the Charlie Chan to a temporary end. (Later, Fox resumed them with Sidney Toler, to replace the Motos, and still later Toler and Roland Winters made very inferior Chan series at Monogram). Few of the very formularised Chans stand up well today; they are slow, plodding, obvious, entertaining because of the arrays of suspects and the occasional bright quip, but incredibly pedestrian and talkative. I do have fond memories of the tomb sequences of "Charlie Chan in Egypt" chilling me as a child, but I fear that even this would probably seem quite tame today. The Motos however were quite different; the detailed deductions were implied rather than stated, and for the most part the films moved, like old Pathe serials, or the Fu Manchu and Tarzan novels. Further, for "B" films they had amazing production values; fine camerawork, and a wholesale utilisation of Fox's myriad standing sets - streets, museums, palaces, railway stations. The Chans talked themselves to death in standard hotel room and night-club sets; the Motos kept on the go all the time and grabbed just about every set facility that Fox could offer. "Mr. Moto Takes A Vacation" bowls along briskly to a tune of prowlings, chases, stunt judo fights, knives in the back and such-like, makes Moto a far more animated and interesting sleuth than Chan and, although this entry has a little more comedy than usual, ensures that that comedy too helps to keep the plot moving. The car chase - along crowded streets - early in the film is obviously quite an expensive chase; the night scenes are shot at night, and not just done day-for-night with filters. All in all it's a very slick and smooth little film, certainly a most entertaining one, and

shows more production polish and know-how than many a major feature. Though the plot is typically complicated, there's never much doubt as to who the major culprit is, and in the meantime it's grand fun watching dear old Lionel Atwill doing his best to draw all the suspicion on himself!

### I n t e r m i s s i o n

"The Hound of the Baskervilles" (20th Century Fox, 1939) Dir: Sidney Lanfield  
Pro: Gene Markey; Based on the novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; screenplay by Ernest Pascal; camera: Peverell Marley; editor: Robt. Simpson; 8 reels  
With Basil Rathbone, Nigel Bruce, Richard Greene, Wendy Barrie, Lionel Atwill, John Carradine, Barlowe Borland, Beryl Mercer, Morton Lowry, Ralph Forbes, E.E. Clive, Eily Malyon, Nigel de Brulier, Mary Gordon, Peter Willes, Ivan Simpson, Ian Maclaren, John Burton, Dennis Green, Ewan Thomas, Ruth Terry.

Probably the best of the many American, British and German versions of one of Doyle's most popular Holmes stories, this "Hound of the Baskervilles" remains an impressive, elaborately-mounted and certainly "respectful" treatment of Doyle, even if it is a little too measured in its pacing, and never quite makes the most of its excitement potential. For some of the shortcomings, credit director Lanfield - hardly an ideal choice for this kind of film - the total absence of any background music, which certainly could have heightened tension considerably in the closing sequence, and the rather studio-bound feel of the whole thing. Studio "exteriors" had become a fine art in the 30's; to see how much has been lost of this art, compare the "exteriors" in this film with those in the recent Hammer films "The Mummy" and "Curse of the Mummy's Tomb", where color only emphasises all the blank space and lack of real design. Studio "exteriors" when well done can enhance rather than detract from the power of a scene, and certainly Whale's studio exteriors in his horror films - and those of Lang, Tourneur and Fleury - have had a stylistic power that shooting in natural locations couldn't have duplicated. But if you're going to build Dartmoor and Grimpen Mire in a studio, no matter how artfully you design it, you're not going to succeed unless you really create an atmosphere of awesome desolation. "Son of Frankenstein", which didn't really rely on outdoor sets, created that atmosphere via a few dead trees. Cunning and handsome as the moor sets in "Hound of the Baskervilles" are -- and they are enhanced by some barely perceptible use of gauzes over the lens -- you never once have the feeling of boundless space. One is all too aware that victim, pursuer and rescuers are all carefully running around one basic set, with rocks strategically placed to allow for a good variety of camera angles.

Perhaps one would carp less if the second Rathbone-Fox-Holmes film, Werker's "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes", hadn't been so much better. One would have liked "Hound" to be the definitive Holmes film. But while other Holmeses may have been more in keeping with Doyle's creation than Rathbone's visually ideal but rather snide detective (my personal favorite is Arthur Wontner, though Robert Rendell and Clive Brook were rather good too) and other adaptations may have been more enjoyable (the Barrymore silent is a grand lark, though it's about as related to Doyle as his "Moby Dick" was to Melville), this "Hound" does warrant respect and admiration for being about the most faithful to its source material. The changes are minor: the butler, named "Barrymore" in the novel, has been renamed for obvious reasons; a seance not in the novel has been written in, probably out of deference to Doyle's well-publicised interest in spiritualism, and the villain (seldom has there been less doubt about a "mystery" villain) quite definitely met his end in the mire in the book, while the film leaves it rather open. Slow-paced or not however, the film's mounting and flawless cast make it solidly enjoyable throughout, though one rather resents Richard Greene getting billing over Rathbone. Atwill, in another marvellous red herring role, has some fine low-key closeups, and launches into his lines with especial enthusiasm when he has something particularly unpleasant to report on! And even though this is a product of the ultra-conservative Code-dominated years, we are still permitted to hear Holmes asking Dr. Watson for the needle as his graceful curtain line. ---W.K.Everson---