A Program of Adventure and Swashbuckling

"ZAMPA" (Joseph M. Sohn, UA, 1930) Director: Eugene J. Forde
Produced by Hugo Biesenfeld and William Cameron Menzies; photographed by Karl Struss; based on the composition by Louis Joseph Ferdinand Hérald; supervised by Orville O. Dull; one reel
With Buddy Roosevelt, Wallace McDonald.

The Biesenfeld-Menzies musical shorts of 1929/30 made an interesting series. Some, like "The Glorious Vamp", were wild improvisations built around varied musical themes, but most of them, like "Zampa", took some well-known popular classic and told its "story". Handsomely photographed, often using impressive standing sets, they are certainly to be preferred to those Cinemascope horrors in which the cameras merely roamed up and down the aisles while photographing different segments of the orchestra. "Zampa" is a fast-paced little film, with a Fairbanksian flourish, even though western star Buddy Roosevelt doesn’t quite have Doug’s dash and grace in the duelling sequences!

"THE SWASHBUCKLERS" (David Wolper Productions, 1964) Written and produced by Al Ramrus; 3 reels. Narrator: Joseph Cotten

Wolper’s "Hollywood and the Stars" series was generally rather disappointing, due in part to the limited resources to which they had access, and to the assembly-line approach which they brought to everything. Only when they had a real film buff like Don Miller working on a specific subject did they really rise to the occasion. "The Swashbucklers" both delights and annoys. It is a most enjoyable superficial coverage of the field, with the emphasis rightly placed on Fairbanks and Flynn. If most of their action scenes are familiar, they are all good enough to be enjoyed again, and there are many off-screen shots of them which are not so familiar and are most entertaining. However, the personal lives of both Fairbanks and Flynn are handled with a lack of taste and grace, and worst of all, the loss of youth for both stars is treated as though it were some kind of personal crime. This seems most especially unfair in the case of Doug, who retained his zest and dash right through all of his talkies. With important Salamack, Goldwyn, MGM, Paramount and other films denied them, the admittedly rich Warner Bros library is put to extensive use, and to make up for the gaps, there’s a good deal of unnecessary trickiness with the editing shears. It was both fun - and creative film-making - in earlier shows to put together montages of Cagney slapping women, or in like manner to emphasise the clichéd nature of Pat O’Brien’s eternal “best friend” role. But to cut together scenes of courtroom fanning, or musical fanfares, is merely stretching for effect and tends to reduce the stature of what is, after all, a stylish and important genre. However, it all moves very fast, it’s great to see Doug and Flynn in their highlights again, along with all the villains who crossed swords with them - Rathbone, Rains, Danelli etc., and it’s fun too identifying all the lesser and unbilled clips, mainly from cheap Columbia epics like "Mark of the Avenger", "Thief of Damascus" and their ilk.

- Intermission -

"THE DRUM" (U.S. title: "Drums") (Alexander Korda-London Films-UA, 1936)
Directed by Zoltan Korda; screenplay by Lejos Biro, Arthur Wimperis, Hugh Gray and Patric Knowlan from the novel by A.E. W. Mason; photographed by Georges Perinal; Location photography by Irmond Borrodaille;
Settings by Vincent Korda; music by John Greenwood; edited by Henry
It has been a very long time since an original color print of "The Drum" was available, and this is a flawless print which is a joy to behold. Unlike Korda's "The Four Feathers" and "The Thief of Bagdad", which were superb in color but still had such strength in performers, music, plot, decor and action that they held up quite nicely in black-and-white, "The Drum" really needs its color to pay off.

Basically, it is just a schoolboy adventure yarn, and as much one of the best ever filmed. Actually precise few ever were filmed deliberately on the schoolboy level, although quite a few, and Flynn's "Robin Hood" is a prime example, wound up that way unintentionally. Somehow "The Drum" manages to be juvenile fare without being condescending about it. All the virtues of courage, loyalty, honesty and, naturally, British moral superiority over everyone else, are neatly upheld, there's enough action, but not too much of it, and no real gore or blood-letting. One English head is heaved through a window and an Indian renegade has his arm pinned to a wall by a Bayonet -- but of course, you can't have a Khyber Pass adventure without that kind of thing. Otherwise the British die silently and bravely, and the Indians die with much shrieking, but both do it bloodlessly. Unbelievable heathen tortures are merely referred to in passing, and Raymond Massey seems quite without the inquisitional genius of Douglas Dumbrille in "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" or Eduardo Cianelli in "Gunga Din". Compared with "Gunga Din" certainly, it lacks meat, but the sheer size of panoramas and sets, the amiable pacing, where something is always happening, and the restful and rich color make it both an enjoyable film in its own right, and a promising dry-run for the more ambitious "The Four Feathers" that was to follow.

Everything that one expects in this kind of film is there: the long lines of troops ranging over the hills, their bagpipes telling every heathen within miles that they're on their way; the very civilised polo match, which provokes some delightful old-school-type dialogue; and of course, the inevitable evil Khan, superbly played by Massey, with one eye on "the Empire ready to be carved to pieces" and the other on "white throats ripe for the knife." In view of the latter sentiments, one can't be too critical of the note of British condescension that occasionally creeps in, as for example when a wizened old native isn't fanning a British drummer-boy quite briskly enough! British accents abound of course, and while at first it seems unlikely that Oxford-sounding officers could successfully masquerade as natives, one has only to wait for the "genuine" natives to open their mouths to realise that in India, caste system or not, everybody sounds like Ronald Colman! Valerie Hobson, at her coolest and loveliest as a frontier wife, giving Roger Livesey the same kind of loyalty that she had earlier given Baron Frankenstein and would later give John Profumo, is as always charming and just enough of a fashionable snob to be right for the Officers' Quarters. "The Drum" should be buried in a time-capsule, along with "Sanders of the River", to be opened in some colonial outpost some 500 years from now. Of course, if it were opened prematurely the British might have the same kind of trouble with these two films that we're having with "The Birth of a Nation" over here!