January 12, 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A Program of Grand Guignol and Victorian Melodrama

Last year's combination of Boris Karloff and Tod Slaughter proved so enjoyable that we've decided to repeat the process -- and as long as the film supply holds up, there's no reason why we shouldn't make this an annual event. We last showed "Bedlam" some six years ago, and to our knowledge it hasn't had a single theatrical or film society exposure in the interim. "The Crimes of Stephen Hawke" was never released theatrically in the U.S., although it might be assumed that it turned up in a limited fashion in the early days of television.

"THE CRIMES OF STEPHEN HAWKE" (Ambassador, 1936) Produced and directed by George King. Scenario by Paul White and Jack Celestin, with additional dialogue by H.F. Malby, from a story by Frederick Hayward; photographed by Ronald Neame; 7 reels

With Tod Slaughter, Marjorie Taylor, Eric Portman, J.D. Williams, Ben Sutton, Gerald Barry, George N. Slater, Charles Penrose, Norman Pierce, Flotema and Jetson, Roddy Hughes.

Boris Karloff, Ernst Torrence, Gustav von Seyffertitz and Lowell Sherman all rolled into one, Tod Slaughter was probably Britain's most unique villain. He specialized on states as well as on film, in the ripe old Victorian melodramas which were played straight enough, and with genuine flavor, to be accepted as the real article, but also with just enough corn-in-the-cob to be taken as broad spoofs too. The trick was that only Slaughter himself romantically hammed it up for comic effect; for the rest, the wacky plots were presented in deadly earnest, and so were the performances. Slaughter seemed to use only veteran hands, who could play it in the authentic old style, or up-and-coming young players, who, in their desire to please and create an impression, never quite realized how their inexperience was being exploited!

Of all the dashing young men and dourly young lasses who were Tod's heroes and heroines, only Eric Portman escaped the fate of quick and well-deserved obscurity. Just as Keaton used absurdly stupid heroines, so did Slaughter use absurdly virtuous ones, the better to repudiate his own lecherous advances. In this particular entry, Tod's actions are purely murderous, and his lechery is suppressed. But needless to say, there is a rich and powerful aristocrat who wishes to marry the unwilling heroine. She squeezes him beautifully in one scene where he comes to her room and asks if he may sit down, and she replies with a withering look, "Yes, if you intend staying long enough to make it worth your while!"

Not quite up to the standard of Tod's best ("Harla Marnen", "Sweeney Todd", "Crimes at the Dark House"), and taken just a shade more seriously than most, "The Crimes of Stephen Hawke" is none-the-less well up to his average standard. He gets off to a good start by breaking the spine of an obnoxious little boy, and thereafter plays his big scenes with leers, chuckles, double-entendres, gliding gait and a cloak drawn, vampire fashion, around his features. Every so often, there's a superb throw-away line -- "The Widow Simpson and her six miserable sons were heaved through the skylight; I trusted them and the last reel in particular has a lovely theatrical flavor with its old-time smoke and dramatic exits and entrances. One shot of a body hurtling through the air to land at the heroine's feet is as classic an example of perfect timing as Mary Cooper's plane crashing outside Colleen Moore's cottage in "Lilac Time".)

Although the later films of Slaughter & King, made for British Lion, had more elaborate production values, this one is nevertheless surprisingly slick for a wall British independent film of the 30's. The sets are more than adequate, and the camerawork nicely glossy, though from some back projection where the top runs out and repeats a couple of times within the space of a single scene.

Perhaps because the bulk of the film is a little more serious than was usual for Tod, it has all been dumped into a modern framework, with Tod telling the story course of a BBC radio interview. This also allows for the quite extraneous introduction of Flotema and Jetson, a British singing team of the 30's. They just happened on the scene. Actually, apart from a few big names -- comedians like Will Hay and Jack Hulbert, and impressed British actors like Colesworth, who alternated between Britain and America -- British movie "names" in the 30's took very much of a back seat to the Hollywood names. Gracie Fields, Madeleine Carroll (for a while), Jessie Matthews, Jack Buchanan, Hubert, Hay, Forsyth and a few others made hardly formidable competition to the big era of the Hollywood star system. But in radio, it was a different matter entirely, and British radio comics, band-leaders, singers etc. had an enormous following. Variety-type films often lumped all of these together, but few of them became important in movies. Flotema and Jetson were typically of the "folksy" singer-comics who had a big radio following, but really couldn't do very much, and so
in movies were limited to occasional guest-shot's like this one. Which is perhaps just as well, as, the marvellous Western Brothers excepted, British radio talent of the 30's was not markedly outstanding. The "In Town Tonight" show which is used at the device to introduce Slaughter was a tremendously popular Saturday radio show that (without competition from other stations) had the same kind of following that Ed Sullivan has over here. Just why is a matter for conjecture, since most of the "interesting people in town tonight" were singularly ill-prepared and nondescript. When the show got someone special to work with, they rather lost their heads. During Gene Autry's visit, the show faked-up continual cross-cutting as Gene radioed messages from the ship, and then from horseback as he and Champion allegedly galloped their way from Southampton to London to appear in time to sing a last-minute song! I digress, but perhaps justifiably so, since there isn't likely to be any film in the immediate future that will allow for a little unimportant historic data on British radio of the 30's.

In any event, those of you who already know Tod Slaughter's work will know what to expect; and for the rest, there's a pleasant (I hope) and certainly exhilarating surprise in store!

INTERMISSION

"BEDLAM" (Eko Radio, 1946) Directed by Mark Robson; produced by Val Lewton; Executive Producer, Jack Gross; screenplay by Mark Robson, Carlos Keith; camera: Nicholas Musuraca; 8 reels
With Boris Karloff, Anna Lee, Richard Fraser, Billy House, Glenn Vernon, Jason Robards, Ian Wolfe, Leyland Hodgson, Joan Newton, Elizabeth Russell.

The last and most elaborate of the nine (1942-1946) Val Lewton horror films for Eko, "Bedlam" is actually less of a horror film in the traditional sense than many others in the series, though it does have a grim enough theme and several truly horrific moments, especially in the closing sequences. Designed as a "prestige" horror film, it was supervised by Jack Gross and thus became elevated on the higher commercial level as much films as "Night Song" and "Berlin Express". Possibly, as the last in a contracted group, it was planned as a much more elaborately detailed film than its predecessors in the hope that a spectacular and unexpected success might result in a green-light for a further series, or for further "specials". Not exactly a failure, it was still not enough of a success for those hopes to be realised. To Gross' credit, he does seem to have left Lewton pretty much alone. But there's too much padding and too much footage; the story gets bogged down in by-play and decor, and it hasn't the directness and tautness of the others. The best of them anyway had been directed by Tourneur and Wise, who always brought their own individual style to add to what was already provided by cast and script. Robson however was a heavy-handed director (then, as now) who seemed to contribute nothing extra, and to rely on skilled camerawork, good writing, and players like Karloff, to see him through. Luckily, "Bedlam" does have good writing, fine atmospheric camerawork, and an excellent performance from Karloff, whose role doesn't quite have the slushy quality that he had in "The Body Snatcher", but who is nevertheless very well served indeed.

The climax, wherein the sadistic prison governor is tried for his life by the insane inmates is fine material, and disappointing though the film as a whole is, it is still vastly superior to the later and not dissimilar Karloff film "The Haunted Stranger" with its unsmiling brutality and sex. "Bedlam" at times gets a little too clever for its own good in its name-dropping, and in the curious scene for telling the birth of the movie! And Anna Lee's once lovely smile, bends, like Maria Schell's, to become annoying by its mechanical repetition. Incidentally, there's an interesting blueprint for "Goldfinger" in a death-by-gold-paint sequence! "Bedlam" on tv has usually been rather heavily hacked, though less objectionably so than "Cat People" from which the complete swimming-pool sequence is often excised. Our print is in excellent shape, and fully complete - except - alas - for the original credits. With these missing, we should mention that they made use of the painting by William Hogarth, sections of which are used throughout the film as a transitional device.

- William K. Everson -