Tuesday next, March 15: Frank Borzage's MAN'S CASTLE (1933) with Spencer Tracy, Loretta Young, and William Wellman's CALL OF THE WILD (1935) with Joel McCrea, Loretta Young, Jack Oakie, Reginald Owen.

Tuesday March 8 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Three cartoons

There have been almost as many lampoons of the Jekyll & Hyde story as there have been legitimate versions, said lampoons ranging from Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy and Costello to Tom & Jerry. The cartoon field has been especially rich in inventive and savage takeoffs. We ran "Dr. Jekyll's Hyde" (Warner Bros., 1932, directed by I. Freleng) only a year ago, but it is too good - and too appropriate - not to repeat today. Another good Freleng-Warner cartoon is "Hyde and Hare" (1954) with Bugs Bunny versus a distinctly Marchion Hyde. Completing the trio is "Betty Boop's Penthouse" (1933), which is only distantly related, but well worth incorporating into the group in that the bathing-suit-clad Betty is menaced by a laboratory-created Frankensteinian monster. This little black-and-white cartoon, like so many Boops of the day, makes pleasing use of the Rodgers and Hart score from "Love Me Tonight".

Two comparisons

Brief excerpts from the competing silent 1920 versions. The fine John Barrymore version, directed by John S. Robertson, hardly needs a recommendation here. Louis B. Mayer's version, also shot in New York, stars Sheldon Lewis as a very superficial bosey-man Hyde. Cheaply made, modernized to cut down on costs, and not allowing for the use of contemporary New York street scenes, hopped up with long stock-shot fire sequences, and afflicted with a hasty ending in which the whole thing turns out to be a dream, this version hardly rates more than an indulgent nod in passing.

DR JEKYLL & MR HYDE (Paramount; produced 1931; released: January 1932)

Directed by Robert Florey; scenario by Samuel Hoffenstein and Tony Halas from the story by Robert Louis Stevenson; camera: Karl Struss. 103 minutes


This long-lost but well-remembered classic hasn't been screened in the United States for more than 25 years, and in the process has built for itself an almost legendary reputation. It's reassuring to note that for once at least, and despite certain shortcomings, the reputation holds up under this belated reappraisal. Legal and copyright complications have kept the film in limbo, but I suspect too that some aspects of the Hyde characterization - which at times take on characteristics of Negro stereotype, curiously mixed with Chinese dialect - may have discouraged any attempts to overcome those legal problems.

Although it is undoubtedly ultra-stylish Grand Guignol, I can't help feeling that in a sense -- and more a literary than a filmic sense -- it falls short of the silent Barrymore version, which for me at least is still the definitive Jekyll & Hyde. Mamoulian's version is far too sparse in establishing milieu, characters and backgrounds. There is too little depth to what it still a provocative and important theme, and the assumption seems to be that everyone must be familiar with the story, so let's get on with it. It just doesn't have the dignity and thoughtfulness that it deserves, nor is this wholly a flaw of the script. Even Mamoulian's physical and visual pacing seems a trifle too rapid; pans and other camera movements are sometimes so swift that one feels like a tourist in an art museum, being rushed around by the guide from one exhibit to another. Although the film is somewhat longer than the Barrymore version, it contains considerably long plot and exposition.

So much however for criticism. If nothing else, it's good to see a property like this, made by a major company, that is played full-bloodedly for its basic values, and not stifled, intellectualized and slowed down as was for example, Paramount's "The Man in Half-Moon Street", or the MGM Jekyll & Hyde with Tracy -- a diametrically dull version, save for some interesting Freudian dream sequences. Mamoulian's "Jekyll & Hyde" or "Phantom of the Opera" plays up the visual quality of its rich melodrama to the full. It is full of stunning camerawork (at least one of the shots was duplicated exactly in the Tracy version), the use of sound is often inventive, time lapses are achieved with interesting dissolves, slow fades, split-screens and other devices, and the initial "changeover" sequence remains one of the screen's real highlights of horror, running with the swimming pool episode in "Cat People" and the climactic face-smashing scene from "The Mystery of the Wax Museum". March's performance, for which he won an Academy Award, is occasionally - and justifiably - theatrical, but it remains one of his very
best. For perhaps the only time when one player has essayed this kind of role, one really believes in the separation of personalities. Quite apart from the bizarre makeup, one just never tends to think that it is March who is Hyde. Miriam Hopkins too—normally not very good in these years (though I know there are many dissenters to that theory)—is quite perfect in her role.

Fictorially, the film bears Manouelian's trade-mark all the way. If some of the little symbolisms seem a little too obvious—e.g., the bubbling cauldron and flames that he returns to occasionally as a kind of "hell" motif—it should be remembered that such symbolism is entirely consistent with a story that deals with the absolute separation of good and evil.

The print on the whole is quite good, though the sound level drops in the last couple of reels. It is still acceptable and we'll keep it at full volume; we mention it ahead of time to prevent irate cries to the projectionist! There is one very minor (probably censor) cut in the last third of the film; it occurs when Hyde is sitting under a tree in the park. The cut is not at all perceptible, but what is missing is a shot of a cat pouncing on a bird. It is this action, and Jekyll's awareness of his fascination by it, that also alerts him to the fact that he is changing into Hyde again. There is also one other censorship "cut", if one can call it that. During one of the bedroom scenes with Hopkins, March kisses her bosom rather lasciviously—at the crucial point the film is doctored in the printer, making it look like a laboratory error. I suppose it's not a cut since the footage is still there, even though one only sees it as a two-second blur.

William K. Everson

These pages are always open to guest program-note writers, though it isn't always practical to screen the film ahead of time for the writer in question. I think our last guest notes—written as a spectacular dissent to my own less than enthusiastic opinions on the film—were Kirk Borm's on the German "Lucresia Borgia". We're returning to this irregular system today with some additional notes by Charles Shubik.

"Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde" has been unavailable for nearly 30 years and its revival has been eagerly awaited by a great number of people for many years. Its first claim to screen immortality is the fact that many students of the genre claim it as one of the best horror films ever made. Its second is made by the fans of Fredric March who claim this as one of the actor's best performances and as the role for which he received an Academy Award. Both groups should be highly gratified by tonight's revival of this film.

As a horror film, "Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde" has more than its share of chills and thrills. March's transformations are all that one could ask for, and several notches above Lon Chaney Jr.'s similar scenes in "The Wolf Man". Mr. Hyde is both grotesque and repulsive enough to satisfy any demanding student of screen monsters. As a vehicle for a March performance, this film is especially felicitous. He comes through with everything he has, and that is plenty. In other films of this period, such as "Death Takes a Holiday" and "All of Me", March has often suffered from disinterest and boredom. One slight flaw might be mentioned here; the voice used by March for Mr. Hyde starts as a guttural Chinese pronunciation and ends as a rasping Fredric March. Splendid as March is, it is Miriam Hopkins who steals the show with an unexpectedly marvelous performance that ranges from the blatantly sexual to the hysterical, and she manages to dominate almost every scene she shares with March.

Interesting as these elements are to their adherents, it should be noted that the strongest claim for attention comes from the director for this is first, last and always a Louis Manouelian film. The Swedish-born director whose previous experience was in the theatre and opera burst upon the film scene in 1929 with "Applause" and immediately established his mastery over the sound film medium. 1931 saw one of the better and most stylish of the gangster cycle, "City Streets", which was immediately followed by "Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde". The next year saw Manouelian hit his peak with "Love Me Tonight"—surely the finest musical and one of the best films ever made. In this early sound period Manouelian was one of the most brilliant and creative film directors, and it is fortunate that he chose to direct "Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde" at this time.

When one considers Robert Louis Stevenson's illustrious source novel, it seems strange that Masurs, Hoffenstein and Heath's screenplay is such a hack job of writing. Logical plot progression and continuity are weak and muddled. Good taste is often lacking, although not to the extent of the excesses committed in "Island of Lost Souls", and the subtlety and poignancy of the
John Barrymore version are forgotten. As "Scarface" was to be the last word on the gangster film, the writers have tried to pile up a series of shocks and sensations to render this the ultimate horror film, and have failed despite Mamoulian's best efforts.

Mamoulian has obviously studied the film medium, as is evidenced by his use of the full range of cinematic devices, but his eclectic and often eccentric stylistic approach has been unable to offset his writers' script deficiencies. More serious is Mamoulian's own personal lack of moderation in his approach to telling the story. Over-emphasis on moving camerawork and cutting, and frequent "borrowings" from past films, have failed to lend unity to the work. The oft-quoted opening scenes wherein the subjective camera takes March's place are inspired by "The Last Laugh". The below-frame murder scene was first used in "Variety". Another odd sequence in which March plays a short selection on an organ is reminiscent of a similar scene in Gance's "The Tenth Symphony", but Mamoulian adds an Eisensteinian use of rapid cuts of nearby faces and objects within this sequence.

On the other hand, Mamoulian's use of the sound track is highly original. The transformation scenes have been noted by various historians who claim that the film with its recording of heart-beats, gongs and bells was the first to use a synthetic track. Further contention that March achieved the transformation in a single take is not borne out by the film itself. Advanced students of Mamoulian might care to watch for the use of shadows against the walls which are the director's personal trademark, and found in many of his films.

Mamoulian's use of symbolism, already pronounced in "City Streets", is well in evidence. Note the statues embracing while the murder scene takes place, and the solitary bedpost in the first encounter between March and Hopkins in a scene so imbued with eroticism that it must have given the censors pause to wonder even in those halcyon pre-code days.

Mack Sennett admirers will also be pleased by Mr. Hyde's bar-room encounter with an even more obnoxious type, and his skidgaddle-style disposal of same. This unexpected filig of humor is the only light moment in an otherwise grim film which then turns back to business and gains in cumulative power as it proceeds to its dramatic and moving conclusion.

Watch Mamoulian's bravura use of the camera, his advanced editing style, and his handling of the actors as he revels in the intoxication of a new found medium, and you will agree that "Dr. Jekyll & Mr Hyde" has been well worth waiting for.

Charles Shubik

POST SCRIPT

*** A picayune point, but in the interests of film history I make it. No real comparison can be made with March's changes here and Chaney's in "The Wolf Man", because there were no facial man-to-monster changes in that film. The camera would pan from Chaney's normal face, to hands - or feet - concentrate the changeover on them, and then cut back to his face to which werewolf makeup had now been applied. However, Universal's follow-ups -- "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man", "House of Frankenstein", "House of Dracula" and "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein" -- did have facial closeups of the changeovers.

One other point I should have made is that, like Nosferatu - and Dorian Gray's painting - Hyde's makeup gets steadily more repulsive as the film progresses so that one is never really over the shock of his appearance, or lulled into passivity. Though there is a bit too much back-and-forth between personalities in the closing sequence, Hyde's very last appearance is his most repellent, his weariness andunken, blood-shot eyes testifying to the sheer physical hard-work involved in leading a life of sin!          

McK. E. Everson