May 16 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

ARLIS and BARRYMORE

"THE HOUSE OF ROTHCHILD" (20th Century-UA-Schreck, 1933; released: 1934)

A Darryl F. Zanuck production, directed by Alfred Werker; Associate Producer, Raymond Griffith; and William Goetz; musical score by Norman Young; a play by George Hambert Westley; Associate Director, Mauze T. Howell; camera: Fyvcerill Marley; climatic sequence photographed by Bay Bemnahan; Art Direction by Richard Day; Costume Design, Owen Wakeling;

Historical research, Edward J. Lambert; Music: Alfred Newman; 9 reels.

With George Arliss, Boris Karloff, Loretta Young, Robert Young, C. Aubrey Smith, Raginald Owen, Alan Mowbray, Murray Kinnell, Paul Harvey, Noel Madison, Florence Arliss, Ivan Simpson, Helen Westley, Holmes Herbert, Arthur Byron, George Renavent, Gilbert Eyre, Charles Evans, Leonard Mudie, Lionel de Brueker, Leonide Baren, Leo Carballo, Leo Lipton, Raginald Sheffield, Breandan Hurst, Harold Minge, Graham Kent, Horace Claude Cooper, Gerald Pierce, Milton Kahn, George Offerman Jr., Cullen Johnson, Bobbie Le Manche, Desmond Roberts, Earl McDonald, Ethel Griffiths, William Strauss, Mathew Betz, Montague Shaw.

George Arliss, one of England's most eminent stage actors, and in a sense that country's own though less dashing and romantic John Barrymore, made most of his films in Hollywood in the 20s and early 30s. His handful of British films were largely compressed into the late 30s in the twilight of his career. His movies are rarely revived today, and there is a tendency not to take him too seriously. Admittedly, it is easy to be amused by a man who systematically played the "great" men of history - Disraeli, Hamilton, Rothschild, Voltaire, Richelieu, Wellington et al (somewhere Lincoln landed him) - and played all these men of differing temperaments and nationalities in the same uniform and thoroughly British manner. But one could say it was not with Garbo, for certainly Queen Christina and Anna Christie were Garbo first and the illustrious ladies second. The first Garbo performance one sees usually remains in the memory as her best, since one is as yet unaware of the personality transcending the role, and this is probably true of Arliss as well. Arliss was certainly a fine actor, but far more than Barrymore he was a personality and an impresario too. Very often he wrote his own vehicles for the stage and later hovered like a mother hen over their adaptations to the screen. With an autonomy certainly in keeping with his prestige and stage reputation, he never let the control of his films be taken out of his hands. With this, his manner of working, and the boxoffice allure of his films, he was given almost total freedom by Hollywood. Arliss was certain of his stars, but far more than Barrymore he was a personality and an impresario too.

Not too surprisingly he was prone to use directors who were not temperamentally suitable and could be "handled" and whose work leaned toward theatrical directions similar to his own. Not that his films were dull transplantations of his plays; they moved and had good film sense, but they also had dignity and a "the play's the thing" feeling to them, with no flashy bravura displays of cinema in direction, camerawork or editing. Arliss of course remained true to the centre-piece of all his films, tonight's film, "The House of Rothschild" being perhaps theolecule of all his work. He had a sufficient sense of strength and scope for it not to be termed an Arliss vehicle. And what a pleasure it was - and is - to watch him go to work, attacking those great theatrical lines with such relish (especially the "curtain" lines that appeared every three reels or so), extracting the very maximum from every line and gesture. In a sense, every Arliss performance was two performances. He was good, and he knew it, and you can almost see him standing beside himself, watching his own expertise, waiting for the applause for a punch-line, and constantly congratulating himself on his brilliance. On those occasions when he played an ordinary role, the joy was compounded, and one's only regret is that he never got around to making a film with the equally stern-visaged and equally dedicated American actor William S. Hart. How marvellous they'd have been together - perhaps with Arliss journeying West to join his long-lost brother!

Reviews of "The House of Rothschild" in 1934 were unanimous raves. It was the first anniversary gesture of the new 20th Century company; sentiment might have played a small part, and some reviews could have been bought, but most of them are obviously genuine and uncorrupted. Some went so far as to claim it as Hollywood's finest film ever; others satisfied themselves with the statement that it was easily the year's best - and Arliss's best. Louella Parsons considered it "not merely a tribute to a race, but to humanity". Therein perhaps lies a great deal of the secret of its success, for it was one of the few films up to that time to deal outspokenly with Jewish racial problems and to do so with dignity and honesty. Some of the trade papers were wildly concerned about this angle, pointing out that the screen should never be used for preaching or polemic, and that this film. Time though it was, did "favor of Jewish propaganda". However, it admitted the dignity of the treatment.

Tuesday next May 17th: "Captain Swagger" (1928) with Rex La Roque and Sue Carol; plus "Patty and Minnie Re-HaW" (1916) and other rare early Sennett.
and suggested that exploitation match that dignity — such as having a display of carrier pigeons in the lobby! It is curious that the fascinating story of the Rothschilds had taken so long to be told on the screen — or on stage for that matter. The previous play version had been in 1913, when "The Five Frankforters" enjoyed a successful NZ run. But, adapted from a German original, it was merely a frivolous and romantic tribulations of Rothschild's daughter. That, even in the 30's, its racial theme could be turned into an excursion, was due to the expert use Hitler's propagandists made of the film (sequences of which, out of context, seem to substantiate the theories of Jewish stereotypes) by incorporating much of it into a racist drab called "The Eternal Jew," which some of us saw at Cinema 16 quite a few years ago.

A really handsome production, "The House of Rothschild" has superb art direction, sets and costumes, including a Technicolor finale for the original release, in black-and-white for television. The film's leading actress is Arliss, but subordinated to plot for once. His old entourage — Florence Arreli, Ivan Simpson, Alan Howay et al. — are well in evidence. C. Aubrey Smith is fine as Wellington (Newman's score thunderous out "Roast Beef of Old England" as a motif for him!) — a role that Arliss himself played a few years later in "The Iron Duke." Karloff is quite superb as Rothschild's old enemy — though just a trace of the mad doctor creeps in when he gleefully relates "the good news" he has just received — removed raids on the Jewish ghetto. The film has a luxurious but heavy look, and the pace is well maintained. At a choice spot she-stills cut inside the theatre dissuaded me from seeing it because it somehow looked morbid and unpleasant. That of course it isn't, but it is handled in a rather Teutonic style that on stills are misleading. Incredibly, this lavish and far-reaching tale is told in a mere 87 minutes, and never seems to hurry itself either. It has pageantry and pace, but never skimps over detail or "establishing" scenes; such a theme today would surely take up a minimum of three and a half dreamy CinemaScope hours.

Incidentally, the film marked something of a turning point for Loretta Young, who made six films in '36 (as opposed to eight or nine a year in preceding years) and now a bigger star, four or less per year ever after. Her chapter on the making of this film is one of the few interesting sections of her rather nauseating autobiography "The Things I Had To Learn" which, with its phoney humility, is one of the most sugary and over-stuffed helpings of humble pie ever cooked up by a star. She tells how at one point, exasperated by Arliss's chiding changes in her performance, she burst out "But it's like living in another century." To which he replied, quietly and crisply, "Precisely, my dear!

INTERMISSION

"TOPAZE" (Rko Radio, 1932; rel: 1933) Directed by Harry D'Abbadie D'Arrast Produced by David O. Selznick; Associate Producer, Kenneth Macgowan; Screenplay by Ben Hecht from an adaptation by Benn W. Levy of the play by Marcel Pagnol; Camera: Lucien Andriot; music: Max Steiner; 8 reels.

With John Barrymore, Myrna Loy, Albert Conti, Luis Alberni, Reginald Mason, Jocyma Howland, Jackie Searl, Frank Reicher.

One of the most successful Hollywood translations of a French play or film (others, far less skilfully done, have included "Fanny," "Heartbeat," "Extemmating Circumstances," "The Human Beast," "Un Carnet du Bal" and "Le Jour Se Lève") is both top Barrymore and top D'Arrast. It's incredible that a director with such superb talkies as this one, "Raffles," and "Laughter" behind him, should suddenly find himself unwanted in Hollywood. D'Arrast is still very much alive incidentally, in appropriate retirement in Monaco, or on the French Riviera, or on some such location ideally suited to his temperament. It was said of him that he could photograph a telephone and make it a thing of beauty — and there are many examples of such elegance in "Topaze" — an elegance incidentally denied the (admittedly very successful) French version with Fernandel, or the more recent Peter Sellers remake. Barrymore, admirably subdued, playing with both charm and poignancy, seems a perfect team-mate for the light-as-a-feather D'Arrast, and they might well have worked in harmony on a whole series of Lubitschian delights such as this one, just as Barrymore and Gable had worked together so harmoniously in stylish costume in the late 20's. It is a pity indeed that this was their only talkie together. Stage-derived it may be, but it is always subtly visual, always flawlessly played by Barrymore. I must admit to not having re-screened the print prior to tonight's showing — there was time only for a physical check to ensure that it was still in good condition — and thus these rather general comments are based on recollections of some five years ago, when I last saw the film. Perhaps it's just as well, or my enthusiasm might spur me on to much longer notes when it is much more fun to let the film speak for itself.

D'Arrast, after all, was a man whose Rothschild were revived theatrically, but very briefly, some ten years ago, only to be forgotten. How ironic it is to know that nobody interested in the real value of film are able to recognize. Watch it if you must, but never judge a film by what you see on that miserable and sinister little screen!