Tuesday next: BEDTIME STORY (1933) with Maurice Chevalier, Edward Everett Horton, Helen Twelvetrees and Baby LeRoy; plus "Makers of Melody" (1929) with Rodgers and Hart, and "Fallen Arches" (1933) with Charlie Chase.

December 6 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A Program of World War One Espionage

"LANCER SPY" (20th Century Fox, 1937) Director: Gregory Ratoff
Associate Producer, Samuel G. Engel; Screenplay by Phillip Dunne from a story by Marthe McKenna; Camera: Barney McOill; Musical Director, Arthur Lange; Art Director, Albert Hogsett; edited by Louis Leoffler; 8 reels

With: George Sanders, Dolores Del Rio, Peter Lorre, Lionel Atwill, Joseph Schildkraut, Fritz Feld, Maurice Moschovich, Sig Rumann, Virginia Field, Luther Adler, Holmes Herbert, Lester Matthews, Carlos de Valdez, Gregory Gaye, Joan Carol, Claude King, Kenneth Hunter, Frank Reicher, Leonard Mudie, Olaf Hytten, Clyde Cook, Egon Brecher, Frank Puglia, Lyn Bari.

In the face of all the spectacular and ultra-gimmicky spy films on today's screens, it is perhaps hard to get excited over a film like "Lancer Spy" — and yet perhaps that is the point. One was never supposed to get terribly enthused over such a film; it was a programmer pure and simple, a notch above the "B" level to be sure, but by no means a major production. And on that level, and viewed in that light, it is rather impressive — and depressing too, for it shows how much we've gone downhill since those days. The economics of today's movies would make such a high-class programmer quite out of the question, and in any event the studios today no longer have stables of contract talent as they did then. Just glance at the cast above, and imagine the impossibility of trying to duplicate it with even remotely equivalent talents today.

"Lancer Spy" has a simple and fairly obvious plot-line, and doesn't go out of its way to bowl one over with breathtaking thrills or suspense. But it moves along neatly and quickly, on the way regaling us with some excellent performances from many old reliables, good dialogue, first-rate camerawork and really solid production values. The ballroom scene would do credit to any major production today, and all the Fox standing sets that could in any way be made to look German are pressed into service. The very American main street theatre — utilised dozens of times as a movie house or radio station — is given a medium of art direction and passes itself off very nicely as a Berlin hotel.

If the film has simplicity, it doesn't always have subtlety. Sig Rumann's rather offish High Command officer seems like a dry run for his satirised Nazi in "To Be Or Not To Be", Dolores Del Rio's character is never really explained — enough that, even as a German, she is named Dolores and gets to wear some exotic gowns! German motor cycles scare with those good old Yankee police sirens, and to make sure that no one misses the point that one climactic scene takes place in Switzerland, there are a couple of Saint Bernards romping all over the set! But that's all part of the fun, and it would be idiotic to criticise a film on a level to which it may accidentally have strayed in 1966, but which it certainly never aimed at thirty years earlier. Admittedly it is a little disappointing to find Lorre wasted in a role that J. Edgar Bromberg or any other Fox contractee could have played, but nevertheless he adds stature to the scenes that he has. Sanders hangs magnificently at times, helped by some ripe dialogue, but evidently Fox were well pleased, judging by the post-"End"-title "introduction" that they give him.

If one is to criticise "Lancer Spy" at all, it can only be on the level of editing, and one Louis Leoffler has perpetrated some of the sloppiest cutting we've ever seen in a major company film. (There are original negative cuts, not tv cuts, and the running time of this print corresponds with the original.
release running time). Probably the film ran over-long for its boxoffice category, and it was "trimmed" throughout rather than block out. This results in a number of curious non-matching cuts - sometimes two or three consecutively when they want to finish off a tricky scene in a hurry (as with Sanders and the drunken Schildkraut leaving a room after a party), or sometimes just one obvious one - as in the chunk of dialogue clearly removed from the Sanders-Del Rio dance sequence. Conditioned as we are to current New Wavery from France, the jump cutting is hardly disturbing today, but in 1937 it must have seemed sadly unprofessional.

**INTERMISSION**

"THREE FACES EAST" (Warner Brothers, 1930) Directed by Roy Del Ruth

Scenario by Oliver H.P. Garrett and Arthur Caesar from the play by Anthony Paul Kelly. Camera: Barney McGill; editor, William Holmes. 7 reels


If I seem overly-charitable to this admittedly rather old-fashioned movie, it's probably because I ran it immediately after Bergman's dull, over-rated and incredibly pretentious "The Magician". The comparison is admittedly unfair, but Bergman's film was so overloaded with meanings as to become utterly without meaning, and merely an exercise in mental gymnastics. What a pleasure to turn on the projector and find a real honest-to-goodness movie, which even starts out with a title that tells you exactly what is going on, when, and where!

A rather dated old play, "Three Faces East" was made first as a 1925 silent by Rupert Julian (with Jette Goudal and Clive Brook), and a third time during World War Two as "British Intelligence", with Karloff and Margaret Lindsay. The first, which I haven't seen, was probably the best, but this surely must be the most entertaining. What a joy to see Stroheim in the lead of such a film, and not shunted off into occasional odd scenes, stealing every scene easily with his usual little bits of unscripted business (sailing lecherously as he unpacks Miss Bennett's lingerie for example), and making the very most of the grand old barnstorming lines -- including one priceless one where he tells selffully of his dreams of a honeymoon in the Black Forest! Miss Bennett is charming, and Anthony Bushell is his usual boyish self, the traditional (Hollywood) British officer who lives in a Windsor Castle-like home and calls his parents "Mater" and "Guv'nor". Via a stroke of unparalleled originality, his aristocratic mother is not played by Mary Forbes, and his father, the First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, goes by the superbly British name of Sir Winston Chamberlain! What a pity his middle name couldn't have been Nelson!

There are more than a few similarities with "Lancer Spy", in addition to both films having the same cameraman. Both films are rather stocked with characters who unquestioningly accept the most irrational explanations, and the double-double-agentry in some cases can be traced back so far it must have had its roots with Atilla the Hun! Both plots revolve, curiously, around "the" crisis in World War One, and the master stroke of espionage that can turn the tide and win the war. In retrospect, neither little escapade seems of major importance, but thanks to Messrs. Atwill, Stroheim and company, it all seems to make sense at the time.

"Three Faces East" makes no pretense of hiding its theatrical origins, but in its own way, and thanks mainly to Stroheim and Bennett, it's good theatre and winds everything up in a taut 73 minutes. Roy Del Ruth doesn't yet have the cracking pace he was to develop in a year or two, but the film doesn't really call for it, any more than you expect to find Ian Fleming sex and shock when you curl up in an easy chair with Agatha Christie.

--- WM. K. EVerson ---