Tuesday next, April 25th: A Mystery Program: GREEN FOR DANGER (1947, director Sidney Gilliat) with Alastair Sim, Trevor Howard, Sally Gray; and LADY ON A TRAIN (1945, director Charles David) with Deanna Durbin, Dan Durkee, Ed.E.Horton

Sunday next, April 23rd. One of our occasional 35mm grab-bags. At the New Yorker Theatre, 38th and Broadway, at 11.00 P.M. A 1917 American Feature entitled THE CALENDAR GIRL. The print only became available today, and as yet we've had no time to check on credits. Probably a nothing — but who knows until we see it?

We'll add a short or two to the program as well.

April 16 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"DR NABUSE DEM SPIELER" (Decla-Bioscop, Germany, 1922) Distributed by UPA in two parts of ten reels each: "Dr Nabuse Der Spieler" and "Inferno des Verbrechens". Directed by Fritz Lang; scenario by Thea von Harbou from the story "Nabuse" by Hoffmann, first published in the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung and later issued as a novel; Camera: Carl Hoffmann; Sets and design by Otto Hunte and later Ursach; costumes by Vally Reincke; modern version prepared by Erwin Leiser; music by Peter Schirmann.

With: Rudolph Klein-Rogge (Dr. Nabuse); Bernard Goetzke (von Menk); And Egede Nissen (Caro Carozza); Alfred Abel (Count Told); Gertrude Welcker (Cousins Told); Paul Richter (Hull); Lydia Potoczina (The Russian); Karl Hazzar-Puffy (Hawasch); Forster Larrissa (Sperri); Hans von Schlettow (Georg); Georg John (Pachal); Opete Berzas (Man); Julia Falkenstein (Karzeter); Julius Kermann (Schimann); and Karl Platen, Anita Berber, Julie Fernand, Auguste Prasch-Grvenberg, Adele Sandrock, Paul Biemfeld, Gustav Botz, Heinrich Gotha, Max Adalbert, Leonhard Haskel, Erner Hubsch, Gottfried Huppertz, Hans Junkermann, Adolf Klein, Erich Pabst, Edgar Pauly, Hans Sternberg, Olaf Storm, Erich Waith.

There will be a 30-minute intermission between parts one and two.

The following notes, with minor additions, are reprinted from the notes we issued on March 16 1965. For further material, see Kiracover's "From Caligari to Hitler" which contains a fine analysis, though a rather one-sided one, "The Bad Guys" (Citadel Press), and our own previous notes on such Lang films as "You and Me", "Spies", "Man Hunt" and "The Testament of Dr. Nabuse": also "Tower of Babel" by Eric Rhod (Chilton Books, 1967). For a (theatrically) long unseen Lang - THE MINISTRY OF PRAH - watch the upcoming New Yorker schedule.

First of all, a few thoughts on "omnipotence". Is there any such thing as a totally complete and definitive print? One would think that at 20 reels, not a frame of "Dr. Nabuse" could possibly be missing. And yet the 9-reel composite print that was released in this country in 1927 did contain at least one shot - an overhead view of the seance - missing from this version! However, one always finds these discrepancies in major works, especially those where the directors retained editing control, and where different versions were made up for different countries. Erwin Leiser's "adaptation" credit should not be taken to indicate any tampering or re-arranging, and probably just covers control of the lab work, new print, etc. One assumes the final length was nearly 18,000 feet. This print is actually a little longer. Possibly, with the story then being better known, it originally had less of the lengthy explanatory titles. Everything here is meticulously detailed, there are no plot gaps, and the smooth print - free of jump cuts, scratches and splices - must obviously have been made from well-kept and non-projected preservation material.

Many rediscovered primitives (and despite its 1922 date, "Nabuse" is a primitive in its relation to other Lang works) turn out to have amazing vitality and beauty; such has certainly proven to be the case with the early Feuillard serials. "Nabuse" on the other hand disappoints a little if one takes the attitude that it is only four years prior to "Metropolis". However, this is rather like being disappointed in "Judith of Bethulia" because it is only two years before "The Birth of a Nation". The emphasis surely is wrong; rather one should be astounded at the mastery achieved in the later films over such a short period. On its own merits "Nabuse" is too complex, too heavily burdened or overloaded with the "right" kind of mystery and detection, and for roots which obviously derive from the serial films, but also because here one can see at the source so many of the themes, characters, incidents and individual shots that were to permeate Lang's later films, and most specifically "Metropolis", "Spies" and his two Nabuse sequels. Lang's criminal world was always a dark and nightmarish one, but here he hasn't quite reached that plateau; the world is grey rather than dark, and it is dream-like rather than nightmarish, with all of the characters good and bad - seeming to glide through it in a kind of somnambulistic trance.

What is most surprising of all perhaps is Lang's comparative playing down of melodramatic content. His later films had tremendous pace and zip, and here his sequences of action and chase are interspersed methodically, dropped in where they'll do the most good, but never sustained for too long. This rather too deliberate pacing reminds one of both the first "The Indian Tomb", which Lang scripted for Joe May's direction, and Lang's own comparatively recent remake of the film. Possibly Lang, not yet too sure of himself, was carefully following
a formula which he knew was acceptable. His too-frequent use of the iris device further slows the film. Of course, Lang liked the long film as a matter of policy, not only because he enjoyed that kind of framework, but also because, as he told me in 1963, and in all seriousness, "...if my films were long they couldn't put anything else on the bill, and I got all the money!"

But if the influence of Joe May and the detective novel tend to dilute some of Lang's vigor, there are still ample signs of the glories that were to come. The sets in the first half particularly, with their bizarre and nightmarish design, are often superb. The whole sequence in the Stock Exchange gets the film off to a magnificent start, and Lang's talent for suddenly turning the everyday into an unreal world of terror is beautifully displayed in the card game sequence where the hideous face of Rabuse suddenly surges forward out of a totally black background, like some evil spider on an invisible web. There are welcome moments when Lang's cameramen, Shumway and Crane, manage to stay "outside" the main plot-stream, so that - as opposed to Hitchcock's deliberate light and shadow - those flashes of similar material - one is never encouraged to regard any of it with anything but the utmost seriousness. And when Lang does swing into his action and chases, he builds them by surprisingly simple and unexpected devices, in which movement is perpetuated on two planes. As Wenk pursues Rabuse's car in part one for example, Rabuse's car goes under a railroad bridge and to the right. Almost simultaneously (and this is an optical effect, confirming that Lang did deliberatey) the main action is also going on, this time crossing the bridge going left. This is the kind of editing that Lang was to continue and improve; here it appears to be done by cutting, but in "Metropolis" the same pace-building effect is created by direct cut - from Klein Rogge falling outward and down to the right of the frame (from the cathedral roof) to the crowd below surging forward to the left of the frame.

Lang himself claimed that his major interest in making "Mabuse" was that it enabled him at the same time to attack the shocking conditions of crime and perversion that were rampant in post-war Germany. It is true that none of Rabuse's victims are very sympathetic. Most of them are society parasites living empty useless lives. Rabuse feeds on them like a wolf on a dying carcass, not from necessity but because playing with human destinies is the only exciting game left in a decadent world. For the most part, the socialites look and behave like debauched sleep-walkers, and even the virile Hull, ostensibly the hero in part one, stirs so little sympathy in Lang that he allows him to be killed off so casually, in a long shot, that his death has to be confirmed by a later subtitle. A sign of the times perhaps is that Rabuse is here contemptuous of expressionism, and modern art, and considers it merely a time-killer for the rich: later Lang villains were often presented as being decadent partially because they had now become collectors of modern art. But the sociological content of "Mabuse" plays a distinct 2nd fiddle to the melodrama. Lang claims that he wasn't "allowed" to make the film the way he wanted, but one wonders. In all of his films where he has a message, alleged or actual - "Metropolis", "Pity", "You Only Live Once" - one has the feeling that he really doesn't give a fig for social content, and that he's much happier playing around with his lights and cameras on bizarre suspense and thrills. For all of the implied degeneracy in "Mabuse" (the very first title refers to dope addiction, and there is a delightful all-purpose club where different code-words can produce a variety of vices!) the impression is not so much of a dejected Germany in the 20's as of a vintage Robert Louis Stevenson or Bram Stoker novel, somehow brought up to date with automobiles and night-clubs, much as the Sherlock Holmes stories were updated by Universal into a World War Two milieu. Sometimes indeed one forgets entirely that this is a modern story, and it is quite a shock to see an automobile emerging from the Calliardi shadows. It must have seemed even less contemporary in 1922, when the real thing surrounded it on all sides. Today, the new musical score helps to re-establish period with some very authentic German jazz of the 20's, and a great deal of Weill flavoring. On the whole, the score works well for the film and includes an intriguing and catchy "Mabuse Theme" mysterious theme. Admittedly at times the scoring is a little carelessly applied, almost as though Peter Schriemann went on composing while the projectionist changed reels, and wasn't being paid enough to go back and re-do that section. There is one instance of this in the scene of mob action and suspense, and here the music falls badly; but on the whole it works, and works well.

More so than in "Spies" and the later Mabuse films, Mabuse is here really the "hero" in the sense that Fu Manchu was the hero of the Sax Rohmer novels. Rudolph Klein-Rogge, Lang's favorite villain, was a kind of Cheney and Karloff rolled into one. Oddly, he was also the first husband of Thora von Harbou, who worked with Lang on "Mabuse, Mabuse," and who later, at the same time, is here used to excellent effect in some first-rate disguises which, rare in this kind of film, convince and work so well that the audience doesn't always realise right away that it is Rogge beneath it all. (Mabuse spends so much time donning disguises and being in the right place at precisely the right time, that one wonders where he ever found the time to run the rest of his huge operation!)
Perhaps because of the influence of the original story - a solid-selling number in German bookstores right through the 50's, long after Habuse had apparently faded from the filmic scene - far more emphasis is placed this time on the personal titanic struggle between Habuse and the rather humorless but dogged policeman, Wenk. The hero of "Spies" was a carefree James Bond blueprint; Inspector Lohmann from "H" and "The Testament of Dr. Habuse" a more human but not very active opponent. Wenk here assumes the Sherlock Holmes or Nayland Smith role, and is far more involved, and more dedicated personally, in the proceedings. Habuse too, like Moriarty, leaves less to his organisation and takes up the fight in person. His aims are less ambitious than in later years, but his motivations are more clearly spelled out, and he emerges as a more human (and thereby slightly less menacing) opponent because of it.

Sometimes he is even human enough to give way to rage and frustration, something that the later master-criminals were always too self-assured to do. Habuse has his vast organisation, his bend of blind counterfeiters, his autos fixed up with gas-chambers and a laboratory full of snakes, but it is clearly his own dynamic personality that is really holding his little empire together, and after his total triumph in Part One, it is rather sad to see him brought to heel in Part Two (even though we now know that he'd be back with a vengeance first in the 30's, and again in the 60's!)

Curiously, although Part Two has more basic action than Part One - the drive to the quarry, the gun-battle and roundup, Habuse's excitingly impressionistic descent into madness -- it is slower-paced and generally a little less interesting than Part One. It is as though Lang had spent Part One in establishing Habuse, and had used all the serial-like gimmicks and twists to that end. In Part Two he seems more concerned with telling, and concluding, his story in a wholly serious vein. With Lang, the seemingly extreme and unrelated incident has often been a highpoint - viz the vision of Holoch in "Metropolis", or the coming to life of the Seven Deadly Sins -- and it is a pity to see him bear down on the 'fun' aspect of Part Two. In a way, it's easy to see why both the British and American distributors decided on a condensed version rather than a two-part release. But again, Part Two disappoints only in relation to Part One; on its own it's still an exciting and absorbing work, and we feel fortunate indeed to have secured this full version for the Huff and what have thus far been its only American showings.

Footnote: bear in mind that it was never Lang's intention that the film be seen complete, in one sitting -- hence our decision, in 1965, to show it on two consecutive weeks. Tonight's screening is primarily an accommodation for those who missed one or both parts before. We do suggest that you use the 30-minute intermission to stock up on coffee or other stimulants so that you can return with renewed energy.

William K. Everson