In the realistic (and economical) milieu of the early 30's and the depression, the swashbuckler all but disappeared from the screen, being considered both out of date and too costly. (A lesser but important factor might also have been the lack of a suitable star, post-Fairbanks and pre-Flynn, to carry on the great tradition.) But with the arrival of Errol Flynn and "Captain Blood" in the mid-thirties, the great Fairbanksian tradition was reborn. Oddly enough, both Fairbanks and Flynn each made but a handful of swashbucklers, and if it were worth taking a count (which it isn't) one would probably find that one of their lack-lustre imitator successors (Louis Hayward probably) had more cloak-and-sword adventures to his credit than either of them. Today's program revives one of the best and most stylish swashbucklers of them all - 1937's "The Prisoner of Zenda" - preceded by a collection of highlights ranging from 1914 to 1949. These highlights have been chosen for their variety, budgetary comparisons and to illustrate the wealth of leading exponents of the art. We admit to having bypassed certain key films (James Whale's "The Man in the Iron Mask" for example, which we plan to run in toto quite shortly) and to having made no attempt to trace the genre through the fifties and sixties, where in the hands of seedy, slipping and plumping players like Paul Henried and Jon Hall, it degenerates into a "B" commodity along with the cheap horror film and the cheap Western. Cornel Wilde is probably the only major swashbuckler of those later years that should have been included, and wasn't - and this only because the sequences at our disposal seemed to overlap too much with other excerpts.

In order of appearance, the collection of excerpts consists of:

**THE MARK OF ZORRO** (20th Century Fox, 1940) - Rouben Mamoulian's slow but handsome remake of the Fairbanks film; our highlight is of course the excellent duel sequence between Tyrone Power and Basil Rathbone.

**THE BLACK ARROW** (Columbia, 1948) - a remarkably good medium-budgeter, well above average for its size, and with good dialogue, scripting and action, despite it being basically a Western in tights. The climactic trial by combat (between Louis Hayward and George Macready) is exceptionally well-staged, and is preceded over by Janet Blair and Lowell Gilmore, the latter as a curiously affable Richard the 3rd. Director: Gordon Douglas

**THE FIGHTING O'FLYNN** (Universal, 1949) - Douglas Fairbanks Jr.'s own production was a sprightly, tongue-in-cheek affair that was one of the few talkie swashbucklers to really capture the flair and feel of his father's pictures. Many of the stunts are clearly borrowed from Doug Sr., and the camerawork is by Arthur Edeson, who photographed most of Doug Sr's pictures. The stunt work is in the capable hands of David Sharpe, who is however rather too short to be utterly convincing as a double for the slim and taller Doug Jr. A delightful film however, and a very much under-rated film of the 40's. Director: Arthur Pierson

**IVANHOE** ( MGM, 1952) Although a trifle stodgy and unimaginative in its scripting, this lavish Technicolor film was quite one of the best and most elaborate of all sound swashbucklers, and one of the last good ones before Climax took over. British stuntmen seemed to lack some of the zip and verve of their Hollywood counterparts, but the mass action - staged by 2nd unit director Yakima Canutt - leaves nothing to be desired at all. Our highlight is of the siege of the castle -- an interesting mass action sequence as opposed to the parallel sequence in "The Fighting O'Flynn" in which Doug Jr. achieves much the same results as Robert Taylor, but single-handed (apart from the help of Mr. Sharpie of course)! Director: Richard Thorpe

**THE SEA HAWK** (Warner Brothers, 1940) One of the most tasteful and stylish of them all, superbly photographed, magnificently cast, brilliantly scored (by Korkos) and altogether a good example of both Flynn - and the genre - at their peaks. Our excerpt naturally includes the outstanding climactic duel between Flynn and Henry Daniell. Director: Michael Curtiz ---- intermission ----

*"THE PRISONER OF ZENDA"* (Selznick International-United Artists, 1937) Directed by John Cromwell and (uncredited) W.S. Van Dyke; from the novel by Anthony Hope and the dramatization by Edward Rose; screenplay by John Balderston, adaptation by Wells Root; additional dialogue by Donald Ogden Stewart; edited by Hal C. Kern and James E. Newcomb; Camera: James Wong Howe; Music: Alfred Newman; Asst. to the producer, William H. Wright; Asst. Director, Frederic Spencer; Art Director, Ira H. Wheeler; Interior decoration, Casey Roberts; Special Effects, Jack Ogrove; Technical Advisors, Prince Sigurd Bernadotte and Count Igor Ehrenburg; 12 reels.
One can almost pin down "The Prisoner of Zenda" as being the last of the great romanticist adventure films - and this with no intended slight to "The Sea Hawk", which was a superb swashbuckler, but which didn't quite have the warmth and emotional quality which makes "Zenda" succeed on levels other than those of derring-do. From the opening titles, which have a lush romantic flavor all their own, everything is just right. The cast is hand-picked, and its equal just couldn't be found today. Colman, Smith and Love have passed on, and players like Massey and Mary Astor, fine performers though they still are, have passed their prime - and have not been replaced. The staging is sumptuous, the sets and decor stunning, and one never has the feeling - as one does with so many spectacles - that the palaces and ball-rooms disappear into wooden flats immediately outside the range of the camera lens. James Wong Howe (and he is one of the few cameramen who still seems to take real pride in his current work) creates some magnificent camerawork, sharp, beautifully lit and employing one of the most elaborate pullback shots since 1929's "Broadway". And Newman's score, like Tomin's for "Lost Horizon", is yet another reminder of how much the movies have lost. It's a wonderful, virile, melodic score which particularly enhances the big romantic scenes.

It would be easy enough to find elements to criticize if one wanted. Possibly one might quibble at the choice of director (Cromwell invariably showed his allegiance to the theater in all of his movies) or cast at John Balderston's rather talkative screenplay. As in his screenplay for "Dracula", it stays within four walls rather more than necessary, and plays down vigorous action - at least until the reused climax, with its great duel sequence and exciting stunt horse races. But who wants to find things to criticize in such a gloriously piece of movie hokum? And in any event, it would be churlish to condemn the preponderance of dialogue when it is such wonderful dialogue, and never lets up even in the heat of duelling! In magnificent old theatrical tradition, one block-busting line follows another. The lines roll effortlessly from the lips of Colman ("Then, will you believe this - without understanding - I love you!") and venomously from those of Massey ("It's the day - the hour - and very nearly the millon!"). Fairbanks Jr. is so absolutely right in the role of the likeable villain that one regrets all the more that Selznick never followed through his announced plan to star him in the sequel, "Rupert of Hentzau". And Madeleine Carroll is at her loveliest, and her love scenes with Colman - backed by the combined efforts of mesmers, Howe, Balderston and Newman - are BIG in the fine old tradition.

This version of "Zenda" is undoubtedly the best of the four screen versions to date (although admittedly we didn't see the 1915 one). Rex Ingram's 1922 version with Lewis Stone was ornate, but strangely stodgy and certainly a disappointment when seen today. Raoul Walsh was fine as Rupert, Allan Terry was Stuart Holmes, of course - was Black Michael. The more recent MGM version of the mid-50's was surprisingly good, all things considered, but Stewart Granger was never able to do justice to some of the retained Colman lines. Deborah Kerr was Flavia, James Mason an ideal (if rather heavy and humorless) Rupert, and Robert Douglas a good Black Michael. June Greer was hardly an improvement on Mary Astor as Antoinette. In keeping with the grimmer times, sentiment and patriotism were played down as being "squares": Rudolph had no chance to remember dreamily "the court street near Aylesbury", and Zapt was deprived of that little speech ("I have a feeling for my King...") that is done so movingly by Aubrey Smith.

"The Prisoner of Zenda" opened at the Radio City Music Hall in 1937, and was a huge popular success. The critics liked it too, although they didn't take it too seriously, and many of the reviews played fun at some of the dialogue. Quite certainly it is all gossip and hok; but what style it has, and how much in sheer zest, exhilaration of acting and the sheer joy of solid craftsmanship in moviemaking, have we lost in the thirty years since it was made.

----- William K. Everson ----