Tuesday next, January 16th: A program of Victorian melodrama: JAMAICA INN (1939) by Hitchcock, with Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Hara, Robert Newton; and MARIA MARTEN - THE MURDER IN THE RED BARN (1935) with Tod Slaughter and Eric Portman.

January 9, 1962

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A program of adventure: or Conjuring Movies out of Thin Air

The fine art of making movies almost entirely out of stock footage, and by re-shaping old scripts, is by now an old dodge. "B" pictures and serials have often been quite ingenious at this ruse, and one cheap independent talkie serial - "Queen of the Jungle" - even managed to get all of its action out of a silent serial of more than a decade earlier ("Jungle Goddess"), limiting its new "story" segments to a few studio sets and even borrowing back Iafe McKee - some fourteen years older, though not recognisably so - to repeat his original role. But such economies have by no means been limited to "B" films and independents, and tonight's two films are good examples of "A" product made along these lines. Cheap to make, and usually good crowd pleasers - after all, when you take highlight sequences from one to a dozen older pictures you automatically add huge production values - such films have usually been highly profitable. (They have diminished in quantity of late, due to the glut of good usable material in color end/or Cinemascope -- although footage from "King Solomon's Mines" has seen yeoman service!) However, it's not surprising that no really first-class films have emerged via this method. When players are chosen primarily for their resemblance to players in the older footage, when new sets and locations are chosen with matching-up as the only key consideration, when the editing has to be pre-planned, and every movement of a player designed to cut in with pre-existing footage, the director is under a fantastically constraining handicap, and is doing little more than putting a jigsaw puzzle together with pieces that don't always fit. Bearing these problems in mind, we think you'll find tonight's two films of more-than-usual academic interest, as well as being enjoyable pieces of adventure hokum in their own right.

"MICHAEL STROGOFF" ("THE SOLDIER AND THE LADY") NBC Radio, 1937


This version of "Michael Strogoff" is particularly ingenious since two generations of ancestors are involved. In 1936, Richard Eichberg made a version in Germany starring Anton Walbrook -- and it was this version that Eko bought up, to re-vamp in Hollywood with Walbrook again in the lead. However, the Eichberg version itself lifted most of the big scenes from a 1926 French version (released in the US by Universal) which was directed by the Russian Tourjansky, and starred Mosjoukine. Oddly enough, the quite differently featured Mosjoukine looked a dead ringer for Walbrook with a slight growth of beard, and it was probably this that suggested Walbrook for the role, rather than Hans Albers, Gustav Diehl or one of the other German stars more usually associated with actioners of this type. This final version bears watching, since sometimes within a single sequence (the fight on the river for example) scenes from both earlier versions are intercut with new footage. As a lesson in slick editing, it is quite fascinating. Spotting the original footage isn't hard, once you have learned the very Russian style of composition and cutting. Scenes of revolt at the beginning, for example, are rhythmically intercut with shots of trees and grasses bending in the wind, making revolution seem inevitable and as one with nature. But apart from isolated shots like this, the size of the action scenes, and the skillful interweaving of miniatures with full-scale sets in the climactic battle, little remains of the style of the original. (Tourjansky's film contained one marvelous sequence of a court ball intercut with charging cossacks, the camera movements for the dancers duplicated for the riders in a nod to Eisenstein in "October". Although George Nicholls jr (son of the Griffith and Sennett actor, and director of such expert actioners as "Man of Conquest" was an extremely able director, and managed to make this rehash far more acceptable than most, he never quite manages to overcome the mechanisms and economies of it all. The latter include frequent injections of old Steiner scores - the theme from "The Most Dangerous Game" in one of the horseback chases for example, and the "King Kong" music during the
river battle. The comedy relief seems unfunny and unnecessary—though amazingly, the Blore and Brophy characters do appear in Verne's novel. All too often a visual image is ruined when a convincing-looking Cossack or Tartar opens his mouth, and out comes the voice of Bob Kortman or some other western heavy. And at times, when matching-up just isn't feasible, Nicholls just resorts to the old ruse of "The Informer"—shooting scenes at night against an abyss of black, doing away with the need for sets altogether! And some of the highpoints of the novel and earlier versions (the explanation for Strogoff's escape from blindness for example) are glossed over with facile suggestions that weaken the story values. Nevertheless, there's much in it to enjoy: Walbrook's playing, Elizabeth Allan's beauty, Akin Tamiroff's gloriously unrestrained playing of such lines as "After Omsk, Ikrumt - and then all Siberia will be mine!" When the "Kong" music doesn't fit, the good old 1812 Overture is shoved in—and the final fight scene draws its climactic inspiration from "Tol'able David". Altogether there's more than enough to look at, listen to and puzzle over, and with all its flaws, it's a better "Strogoff" than the more recent color one with Curd Jurgens, which went on interminably with only a very spectacular river battle (involving flaming oil) to its real credit. --- Intermission ---


Ford's "Stagecoach" earlier in 1939 introduced Geronimo to the screen as a permanent Indian "bad guy" (just as Cochise was to be a permanent Indian "good guy") and "Geronimo" was the first of many films to cash in on him. The highly suspicious lack of an ordinary screenplay credit, let alone an "original story", is the first sign of a major economy. The whole film is literally a character-by-character remake of "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" in western settings, with identical incidents and motivations throughout. In terms of action however, it rather has the edge over Hathaway's earlier film, since Paul Sloane has pillaged the hunting lodges at Paramount, and scalped all of their earlier western spectacles. Among the footages you'll recognize are key scenes and whole sequences from William K. Howard's "The Thundering Herd", Cruze's "The Pony Express", Frank Lloyd's "Wells Fargo", Vidor's "The Texas Rangers" and DeMille's "The Plainsman"—with odd shots from "The Texans" and other lesser pictures. With so much expensive footage to fall back on, one would have thought that Paramount could have spared a few dollars for the newly filmed scenes, but they remain economists to the end. Most of the "exteriors" are studio filmed, and the few new outdoor shots are almost all done at draf nearby Chatsworth. While Harry Sherman was shooting splendid outdoor action scenes for his "B" Hopalong Cassidy westerns, Sloane puts his players on phoney wooden horses in front of process screens (though DeMille did likewise in "The Plainsman" too)! Since there was no heroine in "Lives of a Bengal Lancer", Sloane had a bit of a problem—but solved it with genuine cunning. After no more than a few words of dialogue, Ellen Drew is involved in a stagecoach wreck (from "Wells Fargo") and remains in a coma for the entire picture! However, penny-pinching or not, it's a livelier collection of stock than Paramount's earlier and similar "The Last Outpost", and just identifying all the scenes, and matching up the characters with their originals in "Bengal Lancers" makes for a fun parlour game. Plus which all of Hollywood's Indians seem to be on hand—headed by good old Monte Blue and Charlie Stevens of course—and Gene Lockhart gets to double-cross everybody and cringe in a corner as only he can, so a good time should be had by all.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---