October 20 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK" (Edward Small-United Artists, 1939) Produced and directed by James Whale; Screenplay by George Bruce from the novel by Dumas; Camera: Robert Planck; Fencing supervisor, Fred Cavens; Music: Lucien Morawecz; Editor: Grant Whybark; Art Director, John DuCasse Schulze; 10 reels


The beating that French history takes here at Hollywood's hands (even the wrong King Louis is involved!) is nothing compared with the beating that French literature takes at the hands of Edward Small. Not only is Dumas' classic tale drastically rewritten to the point where the essence is lost without sacrificing the spirit of it all, but Anthony Hope is pillaged as well in order for a little of "The Prisoner of Zenda" to be injected. Furthermore, for its climax, swashbuckling is all but pushed aside and the whole affair turned into a Western. Nevertheless, it's a rousing and fast-paced adventure, and an object lesson in how a good director can make a cheap production look like a million-dollar epic. So much so in fact that a none-too-exacting "Films in Review" writer not so long ago cited the film as a prime example of the "fabulous" scale on which movies used to be made! Admittedly his opinion was expressed by way of an exhortation to the film industry to course trends to hide all the economics. And basically, this is a very cheap production. Backdrop is over-used, though often quite cunningly; the sets are small, but by keeping a lot of empty floor space, they are made to look larger. Some of the most effective scenes are played out against quite cramped sets, but in semi-darkness and with dramatic lighting. There are really only three "big" scenes in the entire picture; two, at the opening, are establishing shot from Douglas Fairbanks' 1929 version; the other (the marriage ceremony near the end) is done via a great shot. All power to it for nailing down two scenes on a typical Ed Small budget. The rarely satisfactory Louis Hayward apart, the cast pulls its weight magnificently; Schildkraut delivers his lines with far more aplomb than they deserve, Warren William is a fine D'Artagnan, with an enjoyably Barrymorean half-wit masquerade interpolated, and Joan Bennett is at her loveliest. But it's really James Whale's show, and it's a pleasure to see his signature peeking through every so often; the camera movements, the pantomime gestures and the compositions in the first scenes of the masked prisoner, isolated in his cell, bring similar images to mind from "The Invisible Man". It's good to see Dwight Frye on hand again, and it's perhaps an accidental but interesting footnote to film history that, at opposite ends of their careers, the paths of Whale and Peter Cushing crossed briefly in this film.

--- intermission ---

"LES MISERABLES" (20th Century-United Artists, 1935) Directed by Richard Boleslawski; Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; Screenplay by W.F. Lipscumb from the novel by Victor Hugo; Camera: Gregg Toland; Music: Alfred Newman; 10 reels


"Les Misérables" is reputedly the most oft-filmed of all the classics, the last count being somewhere around the 15 mark - some versions being monumental two-part affairs. This version is one of the erratic but always interesting Boleslawski's best films, and is the very antithesis of the Edward Small work; although unmadeably episodic and at times a little unsubtle, it has an intelligent and literary script, and is above all a handsome, stylish production, with no sign of stinting anywhere. Well, perhaps in one direction - the inspirational music theme that Newman returns to periodically is lifted bodily from his score for "Our Daily Bread" of only the year before! Laughton's performance is perhaps a shade disappointing, although his face is used well, particularly in extreme closeups. John Carradine has the time of his life foisting student revolts which seem strangely topical today, since they seem to be staged with no aim in view other than the spreading of chaos and discord! The print (and very often, the suicide scene is cut) is fully complete, other than for the elimination of a couple of transitional titles. (These were probably cut for TV commercials, and not replaced).

No actual footage is missing, but the absence of the titles does cause some rather Godard-like continuity jumps, since they were in a sense "chapter endings", and without them, a decade skips by rather too abruptly!

--- Wm. K. Everson ---