Monday next, July 13: "TOP HAT" (1935) A fully complete European print of one of the best Astaire-Rogers musicals, with all of the minor trims and cuts that have been snipped away through the years restored; plus three shorts: "In Search of Gamets", "Bedheads" (1930 musical) and Disney's "Night Before Christmas".

July 6 1970 The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Frank Lloyd: two essays in French History

IF I WERE KING (Paramount, 1938) Produced and Directed by Frank Lloyd Screenplay by Preston Sturges from the play by Justin Huntly-McCarty; Camera: Theodor Sparkuhl; Musical Score, Richard Hagman; Special Effects, Gordon Jennings; Art Direction, Hans Dreier & John Goodwin; 10 reels

From such silents as "Eagle of the Sea" through to talkies like "Wells Fargo", Frank Lloyd's historical spectacles have always been rather stodgy, longer on talk and pagentry than on action and movement. Even "Mutiny on the Bounty" is not a particularly well-directed film, but it is so beautifully written and acted that one hardly notices. Curiously, one of Lloyd's best films is "Cavalcade", which makes no bones about being "filmed" and is content to be a kind of theatrical pagentry. "If I Were King", which Paramount had filmed earlier (and would film again later) as an operetta was probably put into production as much to cash in on Colman's success in "The Prisoner of Zenda" the year before as it was to utilise a studio-owned property. Fortunately, it has always been primarily a showcase for his star, so it hardly matters that some of the typical Lloyd weaknesses rear their heads. Like most Lloyd films, it is however a tasteful and extremely handsome production, and the work of Colman and particularly Rathbone keeps it constantly lively. Colman certainly has none of the dynamic presence of Barrymore in his silent "Beloved Rogue", and visually his Villen lacks the stature that Barrymore brought to the role - but as soon as Colman speaks (which fortunately he does very quickly, and thereafter non-stop) the character comes alive in an enjoyably theatrical way.

For economy-conscious Paramount, the sets are quite striking, though they are of a piece-meal nature, and one never really gets the feeling of a whole city, as one did from Cameron Mackay's sets in "Beloved Rogue". Crowd scenes seem rather sparse too, though emulating "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" this may have been deliberate, to give added punch to the well-populated nod scenes of the climax. The mobs incidentally, have some of a Griffith flavor to them - they seem singularly greedy, tyrannical and unsympathetic, even though one is supposed to side with them!

The script by Preston Sturges is breezy, and maintains a neat balance of tongue-in-cheek dialogue against grim backgrounds. Just come in a while a scene really allows him to let loose, as in the delightful torture/chase sequence where Rathbone rattles off some really fruity lines. Frances Dee makes a lovely heroine, but Ellen Drew tries rather too hard and just isn't up to it. Stanley Hidges merely repeats his traditional malcontent from his Hecht/Hadlarrth days, but in doublet and tights. Altogether, while not a great film by any means, it is a most entertaining one, a visual treat for its costuming and interior art direction, and an oral one for Colman and Rathbone. It's pleasing to note that Lloyd gives William Farnum, star of "A Tale of Two Cities", a rather nice little supporting role.

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES" (Fox, 1917) Produced and Directed by Frank Lloyd Scenario by Frank Lloyd from the novel by Charles Dickens; cameraw, William C. Foster; 7 reels

Of the half-dozen or more adaptations of "A Tale of Two Cities" that have reached the screen (and several planned ones, including a Rex Harrison version, that didn't) I suppose there can really be no argument about MGM's 1935 clothes being the best. It has superb production values, and a marvellous ensemble of well-cast actors like Blanche Yurka, Henry B. Walthall and Basil Rathbone to their very best advantage. Nevertheless, this early Lloyd version is quite a remarkable film in many ways, and was thought very highly of at the time by critics who considered it one of the screen's finest achievements to date. Produced in late 1916, it shows quite clearly that Lloyd was influenced to a great degree
by "Intolerance", although of course every director worth his salt was inevitably influenced by that film. The story of the Bastille contains many scenes and pieces of editing quite obviously inspired by the Babylonian battle in Griffith's film, and the decisions as to when to have the camera move also seem to have been dictated by proxy by Griffith. The intercuts and cut-backs are very Griffithian too - although on the other hand, they are equally Dickensian, and Griffith openly acknowledged his debt to Dickens' writing style.

But in other ways, Lloyd seems to be deliberately trying to slash away many of the Griffith trappings: he gets his story under way with remarkable rapidity and far less time devoted to establishment of period, milieu and characters than Griffith would have taken. His script is simple and direct too, and avoids some of the ponderous pitfalls of the MGM version. Dramatically, it is sometimes a little off balance -- there is such a long, placid intermission between the taking of the Bastille and the Reign of Terror that one almost forgets about the revolution, and the climax is perhaps a shade too underplayed in view of the greater excitement of the earlier scenes. But these are minor quibbles, and the handling of the characters themselves is often superior to MGM's scripting.

Farnum's Darnay seems infinitely more worth the sacrifice than Donald Woods' rather priggish Darnay did, while Farnum's Carton is certainly more convincingly dissolute (with several borrowed Barrymore mannerisms!) than Colman's. (One wonders why MGM abandoned the dual-role idea for their version). The device was being rather over-used in the mid-30's, but even so it is an essential part of the fabric of Dickens' story. Photographically, the dual-role trick photography is extremely sophisticated, and a great deal less obvious than in many much later productions. Once there is a minuscule jump-cut as one Farnum walks off-screen and the other follows, but for the most part the matching up of shots is done with unusual expertise.

As both a Farnum vehicle and the earliest-known available Frank Lloyd, "A Tale of Two Cities" is a rediscovery of real note. The print is fully complete, but due to the slightly warped state of the heavily toned original 35mm print, the focus is sometimes unavoidably soft - though it does seem to improve quite a bit in the second half of the film.

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Wm. X. Eversen ---

There will be a new mailing at the end of this month, taking into full consideration the new Cinematheque screenings. Obviously we don't want to make it difficult for you to see films like Farnum's "The Phantom" - but equally obviously, we can't remain solvent if we just cancel shows right and left, since our room has to be paid for anyway. There was a time when the Huff was badly needed, since there was so little material around. Now that old film is being thrown at us from all directions - which is, after all, the kind of Utopia we've all worked and hoped for - maybe we should go into a kind of partial retirement. On the other hand, we are still able to come up with a great deal of material that isn't otherwise available - so we certainly don't want to shut up shop. Maybe we should aim at periodic series of just the really major material, designed for periods when other activities at the Cinematheque, MHA etc. have diminished. For the time being, obviously, we're contemplating no major change -- at the very least we should wait to see how efficiently the new Cinematheque operation works -- and these notes are just to assure you that we are aware of increasing conflicts, and will do our best not to add to the problems.

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