The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

The Great Impersonation (Universal, 1935) Directed by Alan Crosland
Produced by Edmund Grainger; screenplay by Frank Wead and Eve Greene from the novel by E. Phillips Oppenheim; Camera, Milton Krasner; Special Effects, John Fulton; Editor, Philip Cahn; 6 reels


A top director in the late silent period (particularly on John Barrymore vehicles) Alan Crosland made an easy and impressive transition to talkies with "The Jazz Singer" and "Viennese Nights," and thereafter his career went into a curious downhill spiral, though marked by such occasional highlights as "Masseurse.

1935 was his most prolific year for a long time, with no less than six features, all of them programmers - but good ones. "The Great Impersonation" was the last of these, and also his last film; he was killed in a car accident early in 1936.

Like that other old World War One epicsouer barnstormer "Three Faces East," "The Great Impersonation" has been filmed three times: once as a silent, once as a 30's talkie, and again in the war years of the 40's. The upiating of "The Great Impersonation" to talkies was quite neatly done, even bringing in Rudolf Hess's flight to Britain, and re-arranging the bog-burning sequence so that it became a melodramatic highlight rather than an incident. Ralph Bellamy starred. This, second, version, is a typically handsome Crosland film; economical, but well-paced, and with solid production mountings that include interesting use of sets for "Frankenstein" and "The Old Dark House." The dialogue is a bit wild, the English atmosphere curious as Victorian to say the least, and the plot a very strange mixture of spy melodrama and subdued horror. At times, the "Mystery of the Black Egg" seems to push the spy element quite out of the picture, and it becomes far more like "The Hound of the Baskervilles." But all of this can only add to the unpredictability of it all, and the only real disappointment is the minor role allotted to Valerie Hobson.

RENEGADES (Fox, 1930) Directed by Victor Fleming

Scenario by Jules Furthman from an original story by Andre Armand; camera, William O'Connell; editor, Harold Schuster; 9 reels


The rather turgid pacing of "Renegades" can doubtless be explained away by its very early date, and the fact that big action/adventure films still hadn't come back into vogue. Moreover, it is a totally style-less kind of film. It's based on a completely original, and one could well imagine someone directin a French version with Gabin, shining character as well as action and coming up with quite a poigant film in the manner of his own "La Bandera" or Sidney's "Le Grand Jeu." The lack of style is further emphasised by Fleming's direction, which is of the straightforward quality that he employed at Paramount. Not having worked at Fox in their Germanic late-20's period, he absorbed none of the Kunzian-inspired pictorialism which dominated Fox for so many years, and the commonplace images that he and cameraman O'Connell come up with are, for example, far less powerful and exciting than the compositions in the similar, less important, but much more interesting "The Devil's in Love" that Dieterle made for Fox.

Perhaps for reasons of economy, some marvellous opportunities are overlooked; as in "Lost Horizon," the most exciting single sequence is the on-screen narrative (by Noah Beery) of some of Baxter's exclusively off-screen activities. And C. Henry Gordon apart, the acting all has a hurried, unpolished look, as though each player wasn't really interested in the project and had only seen his lines moments before. Noah Beery's considerable footage gives him few opportunities; Baxter and Loy are both quite bad; Lugosi, in one of his biggest sound roles to date, has characteristic outdoorishness, tossing his necktie over his shoulder for a Dracula-esque exit, but he doesn't make the most of some really juicy dialogue (involving proposed torments as entertaining diversions) which often sounds as though it could have been written for him in his peak Universal period. Victor Jory, in a substantial bit, gives the lie to the myth that "Sailor's Luck" was his first film. A climactic sequence that foreshadows exactly the climax of "Duel in the Sun" is academically interesting, but nothing in the film, action, story, characterisation - really works as it should.

William K. Everson