Two "Lost" Charlie Chan Mysteries

BEHIND THAT CURTAIN (Fox, 1929) Directed by Irving Cummings; scenario by Sonya Levien, Clarke Silvernail, from the story by Earl Derr Biggers originally serialised in the Saturday Evening Post in March-May of 1928; Camera, Conrad Wells, Dave Egan, Vincent Farrar; editor, Alfred De Gaetano; 9 reels
(Also released in a silent version)


Considering the success of Paul Lenz's earlier Chan film, "The Chinese Parrot", and the attention drawn to Sojin's Chan performance in that film, it's odd that Fox (less concerned with "Yellow Peril" problems than Warners, Paramount and other studios) should have chosen not only to rewrite this particular Biggers novel but to virtually rewrite it. It's established characters and the initial murder are faithful to the original story as is the later switch to a San Francisco locale, but little else is retained. The time span of the original (16 years) is drastically reduced, and the emphasis shifted from Chan's detection to the flight of the innocent man. True, Chan is occasionally referred to in somewhat reverential tones, and it is he who produces the key evidence near the end, but the awkward and self-conscious performance by E.L. Park (Chan #3) does nothing to build his scene into the highlight that it should be. For the rest, the film is rather typical of the hybrid early talkie that was also designed for silent release. Few films, even from that period, have been quite so measured in their pacing, or so generous in the time they allow for conversations. People speak slowly and distinctly, their words are absorbed and mulled over by their opposite numbers, and back come the replies in equally measured tempo! The varied locations do provide for a certain amount of exploitation of local sound effects and dialogue, but the lengthy desert scenes merely provide additional space in which the isolated conversations can echo back and forth. However, the plot is an interesting one, and the cast full of interesting if rather hesitant performers. Paradoxically, one of its greatest assets is also one of its major disappointments. Lois Moran was (and is, in this film) a gorgeous creature almost approaching the goddess stature of a Louise Brooks. But goddesses shouldn't speak, if they do design to do so, they particularly shouldn't speak in over-wrought tones which reveal all of their frailties and weaknesses. There's nothing particularly wrong with Lois Moran's voice, and later she learned to use it rather better, but somehow it is here totally at odds with the image she projects, and every time she opens her mouth she tumbles from the lofty pedestal on which both we and the script have placed her, and becomes almost like a Keystone heroine, totally unworthy of all the care and respect the hero lavishes on her. Incidentally, her combination of cool beauty, sophistication and dormant passion suggest that she might have made an ideal heroine for Alfred Hitchcock, and it's a pity that their paths never crossed during his early sound British period.

CHARLIE CHAN IN PARIS (Fox 1934, rel. 1936) Directed by Lewis Seiler; produced by Sol Wurtzel; screenplay by Edward F. Loes and Stuart Anthony from a story by Philip MacDonald, based on the character created by Earl Derr Biggers;
Camera, Ernest Palmer; 7 reels


Mysteriously, although it is a relatively late entry in the Chan saga, "Paris" has totally disappeared in this country. Other than for an excerpt from "Charlie Chan at the Olympics", it is the first Chan mystery that we've shown, said distinction being based rather more on its rarity than its quality, although it is certainly a good, serviceable and generally slightly-above-average example of the rather ponderous and formula-bound series. The first of the 1935 Chan releases (there were four in all that year), it has gimmicks and plot twists that will surprise no one. All we have to identify the killer long before he is captured. Chan's attempt will result in instant dismissal (with dishonor) from the ranks of the Huf Society. But it has a good cast, Oland is genial, and the production values are solid, the good-looking sets including part of the Paris sewers from "Les Misérables".

NOTE: As we expected, the School is closed next Monday, and thus there will be no program on May 28. However, I plan to re-schedule the film (deHille's "Whistling Chorus") as an extra program in June or July. There will be another full mailing sometime in June announcing that date, and also listing the post-Summer programs. (If you're not on the mailing list, please send us a three-stamped addressed envelope to me at 118 W.79th St., NYC 10024). We've also