Next program: February 9th: KRISTIANSTAD, a unique survey of the primitive years (pre-1912) of the Swedish cinema by "1917" (Universal, 1917), directed by Ruth Ann Baldwin, with Joseph Girard and Jean Hersolt, a decidedly off-beat Western, and THE PASSIONATE INDUSTRY, an excellent survey of the Australian cinema of the 20's. Note: we suggest arriving sufficiently early to read the program notes on the untitled Swedish documentary before the screening, although salient points of information will be translated during the showing.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Jan. 26 1976

CHINATOWN NIGHTS (Paramount, 1929) Directed by William Wellman; Associate Prod. David O. Selznick; Screenplay by Ben Grauman Kohn from "Tong War" by Samuel Ornitz; Camera, Henry Gerrard; Adaptation, Oliver H.P. Garrett; Dialogue, William Jutte, titles by Julian Johnson; 8 reels.


One could certainly wish for a more impressive "tribute" film to a notable director who so recently (and so unexpectedly) died, but unfortunately "Chinatown Nights" is essentially a freak of film history. The outstanding "Beggars of Life" (1928) had had some limited use of sound, but "Chinatown Nights", which immediately followed, was Wellman's first full talkie. Actually it is still somewhat of a hybrid film, with long sequences shot silent and undisguised by music or effects, and a rather clumsy welding of silent and sound camera styles, though to its credit the camera does retain a certain mobility throughout. Its pacing is ragged however, and its outlandish plot might well have worked much better in the more surreal and stylized medium of the silent film. (It was also released in slightly shorter form as a complete silent).

The plot is something of a casual ancestor of "A Free Soul", though Florence Vidor seems very ill at ease, and burdened by a poor speaking voice, in a forerunner of the Nora Shearer role. The plot certainly manages to suggest a good deal more vice and depravity than it actually shows, and the cast is quite interesting. Much of the atmospheric Chinatown footage later turned up as stock footage in other Paramount movies. Though not as interesting a film, "Chinatown Nights" certainly has more production polish than Florey's Long Island-filmed "The Hole in the Wall" of the same period, reminding us how much better equipped were Paramount's Hollywood studios to handle the mechanical problems of this transitional period.

SHANGHAI (Paramount, 1935) Directed by James Flood; produced by Walter Wanger; Screenplay by Gene Towne, Graham Baker and Lynne Sterling; Camera, James Van Trees; Music, Frederick Hollander; 7 reels


The second film in our East Meets West-Warner Oland Festival, "Shanghai" is more of a lush soap opera than a melodrama. Its racial elements are surprisingly liberal for a film as early as 1935, and makes a spectacular contrast with the upcoming "Son of India", although there are built-in elements to prepare one for the acceptance of Boyer on a Western level — a distinctly Americanized approach to big business for one thing, and one White Russian parent for another! It's certainly a handsome film to look at, and if cliche'd, at the same time not entirely predictable. It's one of the most interesting films, in the curious career of the talented but wasted James Flood.

Wm. K. Everson

Please be sure to read the separate notice concerning our February 23rd show.