The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

February 23, 1976

SON OF INDIA (MGM, 1931) Directed by Jacques Feyder; scenario by Ernest Vajda from "Mr. Isaacs" by F. Marion Crawford; Camera, Harold Rosson; Art Direction, Cedric Gibbons; 8 reels
With Ramon Novarro, Madge Evans, Conrad Nagel, Marjorie Rambeau, Mitchell Lewis, C. Aubrey Smith, Nigel de Brulier, John Miljan, Eddie Kane.

Jacques Feyder's last Hollywood film is a curiosity indeed: richly pictorial, with some fascinating (if obvious) glass shots in the earlier sections, an odd melange of romance and melodrama, and an interesting illustration of Hollywood's no-punches-pulled attitudes toward East-West marriages prior to the Production Code. Not that the Code actually changed those attitudes, but the blatant racial slurs offered openly (by Marjorie Rambeau) and condescendingly (by Conrad Nagel) were changed into the snobbish sniffs and icy stares of Alison Skipworth in the post-Code "Shanghai" -- prejudice with dignity perhaps, but with the same end effect. Even in the more relaxed pre-Code era, MGM presumably had trouble with this project; there were reports during production of concern as to how to finish it all off, and the ambiguous, mystical compromise ending suggests that no one came through with any very profound suggestions. The film was salvaged, not restored. Today it hardly seems to matter, since we can't take its romanticism very seriously, and it's much more fun merely as a piece of highly colored hokum. The full-blown dialogue is a delight, particularly that from Nigel de Brulier as the ubiquitous yogi, somewhat more useful than Lugosi's yogi-mentor in "Chandu on the Magic Isle", but still prone to spouting Eastern proverbs in place of straightforward answers to admittedly impossible questions. Most of all there's the cool beauty and charm of Madge Evans, who surely would have been one of MGM's major stars had not the too-similar Norma Shearer been on hand with the clout to obtain all the plum roles. Not that we have anything against Miss Shearer -- but it would have been nice to see Madge in "A Free Soul!"

THE MERRY MONARCH (LES AVENTURES DU ROI PAUSOLE) (France, 1932) Directed by Alexis Granowsky; From the French novel by Pierre Louys; Camera, Rudolph Mate; Music: Carol Rathaus and Clifford Gray; Design, Marcel Vertes; Assistant Director, L. Asarch; Editor, Paul Falkenberg; English version; an Anglo-French-German co-production, filmed entirely in France by Algra Film and Sepic Film; English release by United Artists; U.S. release in 1935, cut to 53 minutes, by Syndicate Films; 8 reels

Since, even after one has seen it, one doesn't quite believe it, one would like confirmation that this really exists -- yet there seems almost a conspiracy to suppress any kind of information on the film. Despite the fact that it was a preshibly important production involving three countries, has a number of major names in front of and behind the camera -- including French author Louys, better known for his three-filmed "The Devil is a Woman", and was only three films behind a major Jannings triumph in "The Blue Angel", the reference books turn a blind eye to it. It turns up in none of the lists of credits for any of the principals, was apparently never reviewed (or otherwise acknowledged) by the New York Times or the US copyright office, and despite having scoured dozens of likely sources, I found a casual reference to it only once -- in Charles Ford's detailed index to Jannings' work in the French Anthologie du
With no reputation or critical appraisals, pro or con, to precede it, one has to approach it with a totally open mind. I suppose that by all filmic standards it is pretty awful, and yet normal filmic standards hardly seem to apply. It's such an exhilarating film, and everybody involved seems to be having such a good time — and to be determined that we have a good time — that criticism seems uncharitable to say the least. The whole film is oddly like the "story" framework of a Busby Berkeley musical number, expanded to feature length. It's stylised, exotic, undisciplined and harmless. For two thirds of its length it is like an enjoyable dream (possibly one inspired by hashish rather than Welsh Rarebit) — but all good dreams self-destruct at their peak moment, whereas this film tries something that dreams never have to bother with — it attempts to tidy up logically, and in so doing destroys its own charm. But until that point, even if it always seems about to get going without ever actually doing so, it has a lot of free-wheeling zest.

Despite its French production and locale, the design and details seem essentially German. Certainly the French would never countenance a monarch with 365 wives — and only one offspring! At that it seems a little hard to accept Josette Day as the daughter of Jannings and Sidney Fox. Fox is quite captivating, showing much more vivacity than she did in most of her American films. Jannings is obviously having the time of his life, though it's a pity he isn't allowed to milk some scenes a little more. (Perhaps in the German version he was!) Since we first see him asleep, there are momentary hopes that we might be treated to another reel-long "awakening" scene, accompanied by grunts, grimaces and much tummy-scratching, as in "The Broken Jug". Still, even without such excesses, Jannings enjoys himself — and so do we, watching him. The English version very cunningly calls for very little direct close-up dialogue delivery from Jannings, but what there is is very efficiently dubbed in a most appropriate voice. Considering the simplicity of such scenes, it's even possible that Jannings managed it himself, though it seems unlikely. The voice used also sounds a little too consistently jolly to be Jannings; one tends to think in terms of S.Z. Sakall, except that he couldn't speak English either, and had to deliver his initialAmerican dialogue phonetically, several years later. One major possibility is Meinhardt Maur, Britain's own Kurt Katch in residence.

Good or bad, "The Merry Monarch" is a rather lovable freak, and since most of us fall into that category, it should have found its ideal audience here tonight. It's certainly like nothing else we've ever seen — and while one can admittedly say that about a number of current films (most notably "Gable and Lombard"), "The Merry Monarch" is happy, cheerful and inoffensive. And one can say that about hardly anything of the current crop. Perhaps it's a sad commentary on contemporary movies that a mad little trifle like "The Merry Monarch" should seem so entertaining today. Anyway, sit back, forget that Jannings worked with von Sternberg, Pommer and Murnau, expect nothing, and you may be very pleasantly surprised.

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