
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
January 31, 1977

LA CRISE EST FINIE (Nero Film-France, 1954) Directed by Robert Siodmak; Scenario by Max Kolpe and Jacques Constant from an original story by Kurt Siodmak and Frederic Kohner; Camera, Eugene Schufftan; Music, Franz Waxman and Jean Lenoir; 7 reels; Untitled; synopsis provided;

With Danielle Darrieux, Albert Prejean, Suzanne Deyолуч, Regine Bery, Susy Delair, Jane Louvy, Mily Mathis, Rene Lestelley, Vera Ossipova, Marcel Carpent Pitouto, Paul Velèa, Paul Escoffier, Albert Malbert, Jeane-Marie Laurent.

Both of tonight’s films are solidly illustrative of the influence of Hollywood on the purely commercial French film. "La Crise est Finie" was released in the U.S.A., opening in New York one day before "Gold Diggers of 1933"; though apparently no 16mm titled prints were ever made, and an untitled print comes from Europe. Although economically made, supplanting gaiety and freshness for spectacle, it is clearly a kind of composite of "42nd Street" and "Gold Diggers of 1933", translating the rather artificial optimism of these typical depression musicals to a French milieu where the impact of the depression had been much less. The earlier portions of the film, where song is used as a device to bridge space and time, support that "Love Me Tonight" may have been studied as well. The film was extremely well received here, considered quite one of the best of the French films of the season, though critical interest in Siodmak personally was somewhat lower than in France, where he was being hailed as a new Rene Clair. Since Siodmak's work to that point had tended to wear heavy themes rather than light, the comparison with Clair seems odd—until one recalls that Clair left France in 1934, returning only after the war, so the need for a replacement was more apparent at home.

"La Crise est Finie" certainly has none of the advantage value of Busby Berkeley, though it does emulate him by getting the most out of a very brief song, and the quite witty climactic number bears some resemblance to "We in the Money". Perhaps, though, the most fun is in spotting the obvious castings and plotting parallels, with Danielle Darrieux and Albert Prejean doing Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell (though Ruby was never attired in Danielle's fetching see-through blouse!), and Gallic equivalents of Guy Kibbee and Frank McHugh cropping up on cue. It is this familiarity with plot construction and with character that makes it so easy to follow the untitled film, even though it does fall heavily into dialogue at times. Even, though quite understandable, I don't wish to suggest that the dialogue is of negligible importance. After all, "42nd Street" is easy to follow— but imagine how less entertaining it would seem if all that banter and wisecracking were cut off. This film invariably suffers a little atmospherically through its lack of titling, and some gags will be lost without a knowledge of French—e.g., the byplay with the deaf piano-tuner—but its generally flow is more like "Love Me Tonight" than a Busby Berkeley, so one doesn't have to wait for the last third for the music to begin. It's charming, zestful and quite fast-paced, with some unexpected gags—as in Siodmak's deliberate manipulation of crowd stock footage near the end. We think you'll find it more than repays the little extra work it requires.

-- intermission --

MACAO, L'ENFER DU JEU (Demo Films, 1959) Directed by Jean Delannoy; Screenplay by Pierre-Gilles Veber and Roger Vitrac from a novel by Maurice DeKobra; Camera, Nicholas Hayer, Marcel Villiot, Pierre Hena, Gustave Hanlet; Music by Georges Auric; Art Director, Sergio Pinhanoff; Production Supervisor, Emile Jean Rossi; dubbed; this print (see note below) 6 reels; With Erich von Stroheim, Sesuwe Hayakawa, Miresi Balin, Louise Carletti, Roland Toutain, Jim Gerald, Henri Guisot, Georges Lannes, Marie Lorrain, Ginette Baudin, Gabrielle Fontan, Chukry-Bey, Tagundo Maki.
First some basic background on the film, and this print, which seems to follow the pattern of so many von Stroheim films: Completed just before the war, it was taken over and changed by the occupying Nazi forces. Von Stroheim, one of their pet hates, was totally removed from the film and his scenes reshot with Pierre Renoir; it is Renoir who is referred to on all the advertising for the film. Somehow a print of the original version got to England in the closing months of the war, where it was edited slightly, dubbed (and unusually well) and retitled "Gambling Hell". On all the billing, the "h" was removed from Erich's name (to make him sound less German!!!) and scenes of Japanese bombers were recut and extended to make their accuracy seem less impressive! At that stage however, it was still a pretty fair approximation of its original self! It was ultimately sold to the U.S. (by the British owners) at the height of the Korean war, cut still further, and retitled - though it made no sense - "The Man of Korea", with the word "Korea" rather obviously dubbed in over "Macao" every so often. Tonight's version, retitled "Dangerous Cargo" for a later and further edited tv release, retains this Korea reference. The only known untampered with original print is still in Europe, and hopefully one day we may be able to get it. In the meantime, without apologising for the 57 years of systematic mutilation it has been subjected to, here is all that can be seen of it.

Obviously huge chunks of narrative are gone - the Stroheim/Balin relationship just petered out - but it's fast, still makes sense, and I must admit that (from seeing the initial British cut) I can't recall any specific missing scenes. Or, to put it another way, all of the highlights and scenes that I do remember are still there, other than for the trademark scene of von Stroheim unpacking the heroine's bag, and inspecting her underwear with an amused leer!

Obviously, it was an expensive and important production; France always seemed to do these melodramas in the old style, with extremely handsome sets, plenty of extras, and action sequences slammed over with gusto. Few non-Hollywood films bear more - impressively the stamp of von Sternberg. "Shanghai Express" is its closest parallel, underlined by the striking resemblance between Balin and Dietrich, but it also seems to be almost a blueprint for elements of the later von Sternberg films "The Shanghai Gesture" and "Macao". The ending is too abrupt (actually it always was, but more so in this truncated version) but otherwise it's still a rich piece of melodrama, put together by top talent (Delannoy, Pimenoff, Hayor, Auric etc.) and of course highlighted by the Lorre-Greenstreet or Karloff-Iagoci type teaming of von Stroheim and Hayakawa. (Those with access to British reference material please note: British sources cite John Rossi as the director, only because the British distributor could not be persuaded that "Directeur du Production" did not mean director. Both Jeans (Delannoy and Rossi) were renamed John in the British advertising, presumably to denationalise them in the way that Erich von Stroheim denationalised Erich!!)
As curtain time for a music-hall show approaches, the star hasn't appeared, and Nicole (Danielle Darrieux), her understudy, hopes that her big chance has finally arrived. The star arrives just in time to go on however. When the show goes on the road, Nicole contrives to have the star's prop-coach locked when it is on stage, and the star is trapped inside. Nicole does her song for her, and is a big success, but she is promptly fired. In sympathy with her, most of the company quits too, even though they don't get paid and are virtually destitute. Pianist and song-writer Marcel (Albert Prejean) suggests that they all go back to Paris and put on their own show: a show designed to combat the depression, and bring back optimism.

The troupe gets back to Paris and uses a great deal of ingenuity. At one point, wanting to rehearse a song, they march into a piano store, pretend interest in buying a piano, and "try it out" first. Accommodation problems are solved when the unattractive but man-hungry-manageress of an unused theatre takes an interest in the troupe's leading-man; in return for his favors, they can all live in and use the empty theatre. Rehearsing and getting props for scenery still causes problems however. The girls cultivate rich boy friends to help them. At night they steal bulbs from hotels to provide them with footlights. The fat and married owner of a piano store is persuaded to loan his piano since he is romantically interested in Nicole; in managing - just - to keep him at arm's length, she also aggravates the jealousy of boy-friend Marcel. (No verbal spats as in the Hollywood musical, but a good solid slapping around of both parties!)

Inevitably, before the big opening, there are last-minute problems. The piano-owner, irked at his failure to seduce Nicole, goes to reclaim his piano, and is kidnapped by the cast. His wife, eventually alarmed by his long absence, finds out about Nicole, and has her clapped in gaol. In the meantime, a total lack of publicity is hurting the show: nobody has heard of it!! Providentially, the heroine's mother comes to Paris for the opening night and creates such a stir among gendarmes and cab-drivers by asking about the show and its theatre, that tremendous word-of-mouth publicity is created and mobs of society-elite swarm to the theatre. Meanwhile, the wife of the piano-shop owner has found out the truth, and is more amused than angry. Nicole is released and rushes to the theatre, just in time to prevent her hopeful understudy from going on, and the show is a huge success.