

"THE TESTAMENT OF DOCTOR MABUSE" (Nerofilm, Germany, 1932)

Directed by Fritz Lang; Produced by Seymour Sebenzal; Script by Thea von Harbou; photographed by Fritz Arno Wagner; Art Direction, Karl Vollbrecht, Emil Hassler; Music by Hans Erdman; American version edited by Gregg Tallas. 8 reels.

With Rudolph Klein-Rogge, Otto Wernicke, Gustav Diessl, Oscar Beregi, Vera Liessem, Camilla Spira, E.A. Licho, Theo Lingen, Karl Meixner.

Dr. Mabuse was the most popular super-criminal of German literature and movies, a counterpart - on a much higher level - of Professor Moriarty and Fu Manchu - and far more interesting, more ambitious and better organised than all the Dr. No's and Goldfingers of more recent vintage. He engages in crime not for profit, but for pleasure and above all for power; his agents and minions are everywhere, his world that of international commerce, politics and intrigue.

Fritz Lang, who made both the best silent German fantasies and some of the finest American suspense thrillers, directed three German Mabuse films -- the last two semi-reluctantly, since he dislikes reworking his earlier films, and for that reason within recent years has turned down proposals that he make again his silent classics "Siegfried" and "Metropolis". The first (1922) "Dr. Mabuse", so long and involved that it was released in two parts, had marvellous style and some great individual sequences, but tended to be rather rambling and confused. In it Mabuse was introduced as a super-criminal and hypnotist, who employed an army of blind technicians to operate his counterfeiting plant. Mabuse was played by Rudolph Klein-Rogge, Lang's favorite villain, and a sort of German forerunner of Chaney and Karloff. (Curiously, Klein Rogge had earlier been married to Thea von Harbou, who was Lang's wife and screenplay writer).

"The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" was that rarity, a sequel superior to its original. The third (more recent) Mabuse film, "The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse" thus far is Lang's last film, and is a surprisingly stylish and vigorous thriller for a film made in the 1960's by a man in his seventies! Since then several Mabuse films have been made by the German company that acquired rights to the character, but Lang has not been involved in any of them - except insofar as all of them have contained ideas and sequences clearly copied from his original works.

"The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" became something of a cause-celebre when it was banned by Dr. Goebbels, and was smuggled out of Germany, with Lang making his escape at the same time. The reasons for this (and we refer you to Siegfried Kracauer's book "From Caligari to Hitler" for a more detailed analysis of it and other Lang films) were its alleged anti-Nazi sentiments, and its placing of Hitler and Nazi slogans into the mouths of Mabuse and his associates. However, just as it's unlikely that German moviegoers would have realised that the film's secondary villain Professor Baum, with his dual existence, was an extension of Dr. Caligari, it's even more unlikely that they'd have recognised the film as a piece of propaganda against the New Order. All that Dr. Goebbels really did was to deprive Germany of a wonderfully exciting and eerie piece of melodrama -- still one of the best films that Fritz Lang ever made, and a film that withstands time far better than the more "important" "M" or "Fury".

It's interesting that just as Lang reused the car chase from the first Mabuse in the second, so does he reuse the murder in the car in this film in the third Mabuse. And there is a link with "M" in that it is the same rather stolid and methodical detective Lohmann (Otto Wernicke) who tracks down both the child-murderer and Mabuse. Lang also anticipates the popular melodrama cliché of the 40's and 50's in having his mad master-criminal a devotee of grotesque modern art. (In Hitchcock's "Saboteur", reference is made to a killer being caught at the Museum of Modern Art!) The careers of Lang and Hitchcock run roughly parallel, and both of course have specialised in the thriller. But there the affinities end: Hitchcock's world has always been a cheerful and normal one, in which dreadful things occur and nice people are innocently involved. Hitchcock's approach has usually been humorous, and he often doesn't give a damn whether you believe in his characters or not; clearly he doesn't himself. Lang's world on the other hand, is a black and nightmarish world, his characters deliberately involved as if through the intervention of some malevolent destiny, and he cares very much that

you believe in what he puts on the screen. The vintage and very typical Hitchcock "The 39 Steps" (to be shown in this series on January 13th) provides a striking example of the quite different, yet equally effective, methods of these two superb thrill-makers.

Lang's Mabuse is a slightly less omnipotent villain than his Haghi (another Klein-Rogge menace, from "Spies") or than Fu Manchu, Dr. No and others of their breed, and thus correspondingly more convincing - and terrifying. The film draws its roots from the old serials perhaps, but it is no mere series of cheap thrills. It builds steadily and methodically, almost to the same pattern as a Laurel and Hardy comedy, heightening its suspense to fever pitch in the last third, alternating horror with crime melodrama so that the mood is constantly shifting, and finally and literally exploding into the nightmare climax of sabotage, chase and - as in the first Mabuse film - a retreat into insanity. Incidentally, it's odd how the wildest movie melodramas frequently have a habit of seeming sober in contrast with real life. When Hitchcock's recent "Torn Curtain" opened, critics scornfully jumped on the old-fashioned scripting of having spies pick up coded messages from the directory in a phone booth. Scarcely two weeks later, Soviet spies in this country were picked up doing exactly that! Similarly the whole plot of "The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" had an actual counterpart in Germany in the 1950's, when a madman with a genius for organization hypnotised an associate into obtaining money by forgery and other crimes. When the hypnotist was finally captured, he boasted that his spoils were going towards the establishment of his own organization of crime!

Tonight's version of "The Testament of Dr. Mabuse", the only version available in this country, is of a slightly cut and dubbed version. The dubbing for once is rather good - the dialogue matches the original quite well, and the voices and delivery of lines likewise correspond with the faces fairly successfully. Dubbing is never wholly satisfying of course, but it is more thoughtfully done here than usual. The editing too - much as one regrets not seeing the fuller version - is intelligent, except for one monumental blunder at the very beginning. One can accept the meaningless attempt to update it all, by the narration that states that the records of the case were discovered in the rubble of post World War Two Germany. But the marvellous original opening - a man quivering in terror in a noisy, shadowy, vibrating room - a perfect visualisation of the kind of "abyss of terror" into which Mabuse (and the Nazis) planned to throw mankind - is minimised not by cutting, but by the addition of a line of dialogue which explains quite casually (as the original didn't until much later) that the noise is caused by the counterfeit printing presses of Mabuse's men. For the rest however, the editing has tightened the film without removing any key scenes. I remember as a child of six being scared silly by this Mabuse - but also being rather bored by the lengthy establishing footage in the earlier portions of the film. It seemed to me (and of course recollections from childhood can be distorted and unreliable) that there were many long scenes of hero and heroine first meeting, and then discussing ways and means of escaping Mabuse's net. Probably these scenes were not as long-winded as I recall them, but they are certainly minimised in this version. They however are the principal cuts; certainly all of the colorful underworld scenes, and the key thrill sequences, are untouched.

Some two years ago I discussed the original length of this film with Fritz Lang, and his reply was both honest and classic:

"I always made my films long. That was so they couldn't put anything else on the program, and I got all the money!"

---- Wm. K. Everson ----