"DR. JEKYLL AND MR HYDE" (Paramount, 1931; released January 1932)
Directed by Robert Louis Stevenson; scenario by Samuel Hoffenstein and Percy Heath from the story by Robert Louis Stevenson; camera: Karl Struss

For obtaining the legal clearances necessary to present this film, grateful thanks are extended to Mr. Frank Reinold of Metro Goldwyn Mayer Inc.

This long-lost but well-remembered classic hasn't been shown in the United States for more than 25 years, and in the process has built itself an almost legendary reputation. It's reassuring to note that, for once, and despite certain shortcomings, the reputation holds up under this belated reappraisal. Legal and copyright problems have kept the film in limbo, but I suspect too that certain aspects of the Hyde characterization, which at times take on characteristics of both Negro and Oriental stereotypes may, in these racially more delicate times, may have tended to discourage any revival.

Although it is undoubtedly ultra-stylish Grand Guignol, I can't help feeling that in a sense — and more a literary than a filmic sense — it falls short of the 1920 silent John Barrymore version, which is probably the definitive Jekyll & Hyde. Mamoulian's version, though it does succeed better than all the others (there have been a dozen or so straight versions, plus sundry "Son of..." and "Daughter of..." variations) in making the reasons for Jekyll's experiments seem explicable, is far too sparse in establishing milieu, characters and backgrounds.

There is too little depth to what is still a provocative theme (and comparisons with current LSD experimentation are oddly apt) and the assumption seems to be that everyone must be familiar with the story, so let's get on with it. It just doesn't have the thoughtfulness that it deserves; now is this wholly a flaw of the script. Even Mamoulian's physical and visual pacing seems a trifle too rapid; pans and other camera movements are sometimes so swift that one feels like a tourist in an art museum, being whisked by the guide from one exhibit to another. Although the film is somewhat longer than the Barrymore version, it contains less plot and exposition. So much for criticism however. If nothing else, it's good to see a property like this, made by a major company, that is played full-bloodedly, for just his basic values, and not stilted, intellectualised and slowed-down as were for example "The Man in Half Moon Street" or Spencer Tracy's later Jekyll and Hyde, a dull version save for some visually interesting Freudian dream scenes. Mamoulian's Jekyll and Hyde, like Chaney's "Phantom of the Opera", plays up the visual quality of its rich melodrama to the full. The camerawork is consistently stunning (at least one of its best shots was duplicated exactly in the Trasy version), Mamoulian's oft-used device of statuary performing symbolic counterpoint to off-screen violence is again in evidence in a key murder scene, the use of sound is often creative, time lapses are achieved with interesting dissolves, all his usual screens and other devices, and the initial "changeover" sequence remains one of the screen's genuine highlights of horror, ranking with the swimming pool sequence in "Cat People" and the climactic face-smashing scene in "The Mystery of the Wax Museum".

"Murch's performance, for which he won an Academy Award, is occasionally highly theatrical, but it remains one of his best performances. For perhaps the only time when one player has essayed this kind of role, one really believes in the separation of personalities. Quite apart from the bizarre makeup, one just never tends to think that it is Murch who is Hyde. Miriam Hopkin's too, normally not very good in those early 30's years, is quite perfect in her role.

The film is from Mamoulian's greatest period (1929-1934: "Applause", "City Streets", "Love Me Tonight", "Queen Christina") and bears his pictorial trademark all the way. If some of the symbolism seems a little too obvious -- e.g., the bubbling cauldron and flames that he returns to occasionally as a kind of "Hell" motif -- it should be remembered that such symbolism is entirely consistent with a story that deals with the absolute separation of good and evil. The print incidentally contains one curious European concomitant. During one of the bedroom scenes with Miriam Hopkin, Murch kisses her bosom rather lasciviously; at the crucial point the film is doctored in the printer. Be assured that the second-shots blur that results is a deliberate laboratory effect and not ill-timed sloppiness in the projection booth!

Preceding the feature will be a condensation of the 1920 John S. Robertson-directed version of the tale, filmed at Paramount's Long Island studios, with John Barrymore, Nita Naldi and Martha Mansfield. The tight-compression does rather distort the dignity of the original, and makes it seem wilder and woollier than it was, but even so much of its power and strength remains, and I think you'll find it an interesting comparison with the talkie version. ——— William K. Fnerson ———