"THE PRISONER OF ZENDA" (Selznick International/United Artists, 1937)
Directed by JOHN CROMWELL
From the novel by Anthony Hope and the dramatization by Edward Rose; screenplay by John Balderston, adaptation by Wells Root; additional dialogue by Donald Ogden Stewart; Camera: James Wong Howe; Music: Alfred Newman.
The Cast: Major Rudolf Rassendyll and King Rudolph V (Ronald Colman); Princess Flavia (Madeleine Carroll); Rupert of Hentzau (Douglas Fairbanks) jr; Antoinette (Mary Astor); Colonel Zapt (C. Aubrey Smith); Fritz (David Manners); Black Michael (Raymond Massey); and Monteague Love, William Mccreary, Edward Cline, Thomas Callinan, George Wallington, young Prince, Howard Hickman, William сигнал, and others.

One can almost pin down "The Prisoner of Zenda" as being the last of the great romanticist adventure films - and this with no intended slight to Flynn's "The Sea Hawk", a superb swashbuckler but lacking the warmth and emotional quality which makes "Zenda" succeed. Other than those of derring-do, from the opening titles, which have a lush romantic flavor all their own, everything is just right. The cast is hand-picked, and its equal just couldn't be found today. The staging is sumptuous, the sets and décor stunning, and one never has the feeling, as one does with so many spectacles, that the palaces and ballrooms disappear into wooden flats immediately outside camera range. James Wong Howe (and he is one of the few cameramen who still seems to take real pride in his current work) creates some magnificent images, sharp, beautifully lit, and employing one of the most elaborate color gels for "Lost Horizon", is yet another reminder of how much the movies have lost. It's a sweeping, virile, melodic score which particularly enhances the big romantic scenes. John Cromwell, who invariably showed his allegiance to the theatre in all of his movies, and does here, might seem an odd directorial choice in the face of a Curtiz or a Manollen - but he brings it all off so superbly that after the initial dubiously raised eyebrow, one never thinks of the film in terms of what another director might have done with it. As for the rather talkative screenplay of John Balderston, as also in his screen treatment of "Dracula" it stays largely within four walls and downplays vigorous action until the rousing climax, with its splendid duel and exciting stunt horse falls. But who wants to find weaknesses to criticize in such a glorious piece of moviemaking? In any event, it would be churlish to condemn the preponderance of dialogue when it is such wonderful dialogue, and never lets up even in the heat of a duel to the death. In magnificent old theatrical tradition, one block-bustingly good role after another, from the lips of Colman and venomously from those of Massey, Fairbanks jr is so absolutely right in the role of the likeable villain that one regrets all the more that Selznick never followed through with his announced plan to star him in the sequel, "Rupert of Hentzau". This version is without doubt the best of the four Zendas to hit the screen since 1917. Rex Ingram's 1922 version with Lewis Stone was ornate but surprisingly stodgy. Ramon Navarro was fine as Rupert, Alice Terry was Flavia, and Stuart Holmes - of course - was Black Michael. The more recent 1926 version of the 1901 William Gillette play was surprisingly good, but Stewart Granger was never able to do justice to some of the retained Colman lines. Deborah Kerr was Flavia, James Mason an excellent if heavy and humorless Rupert, Robert Douglas a good Black Michael, but Jane Greer hardly an improvement on Mary Astor. In keeping with the times, sentiment and patriotism were played down as being "square"; Rudolph had no chance to remember dreamily "a trout stream near Aylesbury", and Zapt was deprived of that little speech ("I have a feeling for my King...") that in the London 1922 production by C. Aubrey Smith, "Tonight's 'Zenda" opened at the Radio City Music Hall in 1937, and was a huge popular success. The critics liked it too, though they didn't take it very seriously, and many poked fun at its dialogue. Quite certainly it is all theatrical gloss and hole, but what tremendous style it has, and how much of its sheer zest, exuberance of acting, and the sheer joy of solid craftsmanship in moviemaking, have we lost in the thirty years since it was made.

Space precludes a rundown on Cromwell's other films, but I will discuss his career prior to the screening, and excerpts from key Cromwell films from 1929 on will precede the feature.

----- William K. Everson -----