
Faced by even more problems than usually attended production at MGM in the late 20's and early 30's, "Rasputin and the Empress" was made under great pressure, initially due to the fact that it was Ethel's first film back after first films of the decade and had to be completed rather quickly in order for her to do a contracted play. Further problems were added rapidly: the first director, Charles Brabin, who was always being fired from MGM films, was soon replaced by Boleslawski; MacArthur's script was literally written as the film progressed; and the worst trouble of all held off its descent until the film's completion -- a string of lawsuits launched by Prince Youssoupoff and his wife claiming invasion of privacy, distortion of history, degradation and a number of other annoyances that could only be eased by rather spectacular sums. Since the John Barrymore and Diana Wynyard roles, though incorporating elements of other characters too, were clearly identified with the Prince and his wife, MGM had little option. (It was the first major test-case of its type). The crux of it seemed to be that Charles MacArthur's rather free-wheeling version of history had the Princess raped by Rasputin, who, lecher and plotter that he undoubtedly was, undoubtedly had a little more in his favor than MGM allowed. To overcome this basic objection, MGM immediately made a number of none-too-skilful cuts which, alas, created complications that were never even there before. The assault itself was cut; so was every other subsequent reference to it. The result is that every time Miss Wynyard is about to mention her experience in passing, or as a lesson to others, she totters, shudders, all but faints, but never gets to say a word. Since Lionel's Rasputin is so colorful and bizarre in all other ways, one is left to the assumption that his imagination and expertise were equally inventive in this area too.

"Rasputin and the Empress" was the first really big film of its director, Boleslawsky. His reputation continued to be built on a succession of "big" and stylish films - "Clive of India", "The Garden of Allah", "The Painted Veil", "Les Miserables" - although actually his best films were probably much less ambitious: the crazy comedy "Theodora Goes Wild", the western "Three Godfathers". His career was regrettably brief, and he died in 1937. The script, and the conditions under which it was made, don't allow for a great deal of personal style in this film, It is big and lush-looking, its visual glamour dominates production values. But of course its basic raison-d'être is that it provided the three Barrymores with their one and only co-starring vehicle (though John & Lionel often worked extremely well together). John, not at his peak as a romantic idol in 32 (his personal troubles, and his problems in remembering long speeches, made him far more effective in the "harassed", neurotic roles exemplified by one of his other films of that same year, "State's Attorney"), must have felt rather sad (as we should too) that he did not play Rasputin. Lionel, probably still the best of a long line of movie Rasputins, although from Harry Baur to Christopher Lee, has a grand bravura time, milking his marvellous theatrical lines, getting the most out of every lecherous or sadistic bit of business; but it's a one-dimensional straight villain performance, pure Lugosi all the way. The magnetism and the combination of evil, humor and pathos that John gave to "Svengali" only the year before, shows us what a superb Rasputin he could have been, if given the chance

Prior to "Rasputin", another glimpse of John Barrymore and the Russian Revolution in "TEMPEST", a 1928 film written by Erich von Stroheim, directed by William Cameron Menzies, and directed at first by Lewis Milestone, then by Tourjansky, and finally and largely by Sam Taylor. It's typical late silent: marvellous visual style, very little substance. This tw condensation, 2 hours down to 30 minutes, does retain much of that style, but a good deal of plot had to be sacrificed. The ending now seems rather tame: originally Rasputin's resurrection by his Russian admirers, and escaped with his love to freedom. The present ending suggests a happy union under Communism! However, those three missing plot-threads did take some four reels to tie up originally, so if this version is unrepresentative in a story-sense, it is still a good cross-section of the film's basic content and style.

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