"KNIGHT WITHOUT ARMOR" (London Films-Alexander Korda, 1937)

Directed by Jacques Feyder; based on the novel by James Halton; adapted by Frances Marion, scenario by Lajos Biro, additional dialogue, Arthur Wimperis; Camera, Harry Stradling; camera operator, Jack Cardiff; settings by Lazare Meerson; supervising editor, William Hornbeck; edited by Francis Lyon; special effects, Ned Mann; Music: Miklos Rozsa.

With MARLENE DIETRICH, ROBERT DONAT, John Clements, Herbert Lomas, Irene Vanbrugh, Austin Trevor, Basil Gill, David Tree, Frederick Culley, Lawrence Hanray, Ray Petrie, Dorice Fordred, Franklin Kelsey, Lawrence Baskcomb, Miles Malleson, Allan Jeayes, Lyn Harding, Raymond Huntley, Peter Bull.

Although played, and made, by a number of talented American, British and European artists, and backed by all the elaborate production values that Korda gave to all his ambitious films of the mid-30's, "Knight Without Armor" in toto never quite equals the quality of its individual ingredients. However in view of the constant (and renewed) interest in Dietrich, and the fact that - unlike her 30's films for Sternberg, Lubitsch and Manouelian - it has not been accorded theatrical or archival revival in the past two decades, this opportunity for a reappraisal seems long overdue. To a large extent, it represents just about the last of the "old" Sternberg-Dietrich films, and while it is not in the usual sense a Dietrich vehicle (and indeed Donat dominates both the footage and the performances), it has a great deal in common with the Sternbergs too - lavishness, stunning photography (though not as startling as the bug-eyed wonder of the exotic work that Lee Garmes and Bert Glemon created under Sternberg) - and an overall emptiness, despite a huge canvas. And as in the Sternbergs, and probably for the same reason - control of lighting - it is largely a studio-made film, despite "exteriors" ranging from Russian streets, bridges and forests to Siberian wastes. In his closeups of Marlene, peering from under a huge hat, languishing in bed or reflected in a series of mirrors - Feyder seems to be following in Sternberg's footsteps. It's all too easy of course to read Eisenstein "influence" into a story of the Russian revolution, but nevertheless one sequence calls "Potemkin" to mind at once, while the looting of the palace and the wine-cellars is too similar in composition to the episode in "Ten Days That Shook the World" to be completely accidental.

Like most Jacques Feyder films ("Carnival in Flanders", Garbo's "The Kiss"), "Knight Without Armor" has a lot of style, not much warmth. It hardly matters that Dietrich rarely convinces here; it's enough to sit back and watch her go serenely through her paces. Even at the time, critics were markedly sarcastic about her flawless coiffure and makeup through all the inconveniences and indignities of the revolution. (One such shot is missing from this otherwise complete print - Dietrich wiping the soap from her face in a short bathtub scene. A glamorous but tame and non-erotic scene, it was more impressive for the mountains of soap and foam that Marlene had somehow coaxed out of a tiny bar of soap than for anything else!) Robert Donat as usual is fine, and it is a pleasure to see - and hear - him again. Supporting performances range from excellent to awful. British small-part players have the happy facility of looking at home in any costumes and any period of history. In American historical or other non-American themes, the faces of the standard bit players - Harry Cording, Ernie Adams and their ilk - are usually too closely identified with the Western for them to convince convincingly into other surroundings. Good British character actors like Austin Trevor and Peter Bull have a definite edge over them; but the average British small part player has but a temporary edge. As soon as he opens his mouth, he is as unconvincing as was western heavy Charles King when once cast as one of the Knights of the Round Table. There are quite a few of these inexpert (voically) bit players in "Knight Without Armor", and their scenes jarr badly.

However, on the whole "Knight Without Armor" is still an enjoyable film, a typical sprawling dramatic "extravaganza" of the 30's, with plenty of plus factors to outweigh the rather rambling script and occasional tedium.

William K. Everson