"RASPUTIN AND THE EMPRESS" (MGM, 1932) Directed by Richard Boleslavsky
Screenplay: Charles MacArthur; Camera: William Daniels

Beast by even more problems than usually attended production at MGM in the 20's and 30's, "Rasputin and the Empress" was made under great pressure, initially due to its being Ethel's first talkie (and indeed her first film for more than a decade) and having to be completed quickly in order for her to do a play. Further problems multiplied: director Charles Erskin, always being fired from MGM films, was replaced by Boleslavsky; MacArthur's script was literally written as the film progressed; and the worst trouble of all held off 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 other annoyances that could be salved only by spectacular settlements. (The Prince made quite a nice living out of such lawsuits, winning another big victory over CBS only a year or two ago, just prior to his death). Since the John Barrymore and Diana Wynyard roles, though composed, were clearly identified with the Prince and his wife, MGM had little option. (It was the first major test case of its kind, and led to the "any resemblance......" disclaimer used in the credits of all subsequent movies). The crux of it was that MacArthur's free-wheeling version of history had the Princess raped by Rasputin who, lecher and plotter that he 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 created implications that were absent before. Noh only was the assault cut, but every subsequent reference to it. Every time Miss Wynyard is about to mention her experience she totters, stutters - and is eloped. "I have a right to know!" intones John on cue such frustrating occasions. Since Lionel's Rasputin is so bizarre in all other ways, one is left to the assumption that his imagination and expertise were equally inventive in this area too!

"Rasputin....." was the first really big film of its director, Boleslavsky. His reputation continued to be built on a succession of "big" and stylish films - "Clive of India", "Les Miserables", "The Gorden of '11", "The Painted Veil" - although actually his best films were less ambitious: the crazed comedy "Theodora Goes 'Ild", 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 gloss skillfully concealing many production economies, but of course its basic raison d'etre is that it provided the Barrymores with their one and only co-starring vehicle (though John & Lionel often worked very 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 year, "Counsellor at Law") must have felt rather sad that he did not play Rasputin. Lionel, probably still in the best of a long line of Rasputins ranging from Barry Baur to Christopher Lee, has a grand bravura time, milking his marvellous theatrical lines and getting the most out of every bit of lecherous and sadistic "business"; but it's a one-dimensional 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, designed by William Cameron Menzies and directed first by Lewis Milestone, then by Tourjansky and finally and largely by Sam Taylor. It's a typical late silent: superb visual style, very little substance. This tv condensation (2 hours down to 30 minutes) does retain much of that style, but a good deal of plot has been sacrificed. The ending now seems rather tame; originally Barrymore disposed of both aristocratic and communist villains, and escaped with his love to freedom.

The present ending suggests happiness-ever-after under Communism! However, all that did take some 40 minutes to tie-up originally, and rather uneventfully too; if this version is unrepresentative in a story sense, it is still a reliable cross-section guide to the film's basic content and style.

--Wm. Everson--