"THE HOUSE OF ROTHSCHILD" 20th Century-UA-Scheunek, 1933; rel: 1934)
A Darryl F. Zanuck production directed by Alfred Werker; Assoc. Producer, Raymond Griffith and William Goetz; screenplay by Munnally Johnson from the play by George Rembert Westley.Associate
Director, Maude T. Howell; Camera: Peeverell Marley; climactic
sequence (originally in Technicolor) photographed by Ray
Rennahan; Art Direction, Richard Day; Costume design, Owen
Wakeling; Historical research, Edward J. Lambert; Musical score
by Alfred Newman; 9 reels.

With: George Arliss, Boris Karloff, Loretta Young, Robert Young, C.
Aubrey Smith, Reginald Owen, Murray Kinnell, Alan Mowbray, Paul Harvey
Munson, Hilda Moore, Michael Iverson, Holmes Herbert, Arthur Byron, Georges Renavent, Gilbert Emery, Charles Evans,
Leonard Mudie, Oscar Apfel, Walter Long, Lloyd Ingraham, William
Pawley, Nigel de Brulier, Luysden Hare, Leo McCabe, Lee Kohlmar,
Reginald Sheffield, Brandon Hurst, Harold Minjir, Crawford Kent,
Ethan Griffies, Mathew Betz, Montague Shaw, William Strauss.

George Arliss was always of course very much the centre-piece of all
of his films (for more detailed notes on Arliss personally we refer
you back to our notes on the earlier series) but "The House of Rothschild" was
perhaps the only one with a plot of sufficient size, strength and
scope for it to be not just an Arliss vehicle. In 1934, it was greeted
by unanimous raves. It was the first anniversary of the new 20th
Century company; sentiment might have played a small part, and some
reviews could have been bought, but most of them are obviously quite
genuine. Some went so far as to claim it was Hollywood's finest film
ever; others satisfied themselves with the statement that it was
unanimously received. As far as Arliss is concerned, Munnally Johnson considered
it "not merely a tribute to a race, but to humanity". Therein perhaps
lies a great deal of the secret of its success, for it was one of the
few films up to that time not to shunt off Jewish themes into hokum
and sentimentality ("Surrender", "His People", "The Jazz Singer") but
to deal with Jewish racial problems with honesty and dignity. Some
critics, and especially trade paper reviewers, were mildly concerned
about this angle, pointing out that the screen should never be used
for preaching or propaganda. However, they all admitted the dignity
of the treatment and one suggested that the exploitation campaigns
by theatre managers should match that dignity - such as having a
display of carrier pigeons in the lobby! It is curious that the
fascinating story of the Rothschilds had taken so long to be told on
the screen. The previous play version had been in 1913, when "The
Five Frankforters" enjoyed a successful NY run. But, adapted from a
German original, it was merely a frivolous little piece about the
romantic tribulations of Rothschild's daughter. That, even in the
30's, its racial theme could still prove a problem in Hollywood. It was part of
the expert use with which propagandists made the film, sequences of
which, torn out of context, seemed to substantiate theories of Jewish
stereotypes, and were included in a racial-distribe "documentary"
called "The Eternal Jew".

A really handsome production, the film was certainly one of the best
mounted of its year, with superb art direction, sets and camerawork.
Arliss is Arliss, but subordinated to plot for once. His old
embrace of stage and screen relables is well in evidence and C.
Aubrey Smith is fine as Wellington (Newman's "sightly thunders
out the "Peet of Old England" as a motif for him!) - a role Arliss
himself played a few years later in "The Iron Duke". Karloff is quite
fine as Rothschild's old enemy - though just a trace of the mad doctor
creeps in when he gleefully relates the "good news" he has just
received - renewed raids on the ghettos! Incredibly, this lavish
and far-reaching tale is told in a mere 87 minutes, and never seems
to hurry itself either. It has pageantry and pace, but never skimps
over detail or "establishing" scenes; such a theme today would surely
take up a minimum of two or three CinemaScope hours. Incidentally,
the film marked something of a turning point for Loretta Young, who
made six films in 1934 (as opposed to eight or nine a year in
preceeding years) and, now a bigger star, four or less per year in
the post-'34 period. Her chapter on the making of this film is one of
the few interesting sections of her nauseating "autobiography", "The
Things I Had To Learn" which, with its phoney humility, is one of the
most sugary and over-stuffed helpings of humble pie ever cooked up by
a star. Exasperated by Arliss' shifting changes in her person, she
burst out, "But it - well, living in another century". To which he
replied, quietly and crisply, "Precisely, my dear!"
"THE PRISONER OF SHARK ISLAND" (20th Century Fox, 1936)
Directed by John Ford; produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; screenplay by Nunnally Johnson; musical director, Louis Silvers; cameraman: Bert Glennon; 10 reels

Although a trifle uneven, with the melodramatics of the second half of the film not quite matching the near-documentary quality of the first half, "The Prisoner of Shark Island" nevertheless remains one of Ford's best and most stylish films. And few Ford films - or individual Ford sequences - have ever generated more suspense than the brilliantly done episode of the escape from the prison island.

Although a fairly familiar item on television today, the film is rarely shown complete there - and not always for reasons of length. Material most frequently deleted includes the mob hysteria scenes following the death of Lincoln and the scenes in which the jury is instructed to bring in a "Guilty" verdict regardless of the evidence. The grim execution sequence is often drastically trimmed, as are many scenes of negro revolt and hysteria in the plague episodes. Too, the dialogue explaining that Claude Gillingwater has been shot down by Union troops is often deleted. This print, happily, is complete in every way.

The story is based on the persecution of Dr. Samuel Mudd, who was unjustly convicted of being one of the conspirators in the Lincoln assassination plot. Inevitably, there are some simplifications. While Mudd was entirely innocent of conspiracy, he did apparently recognize John Wilkes Booth when the latter came to him with a broken leg, a fact that is disregarded here in order to leave no audience doubt at all of the doctor's complete innocence. And the incredibly savage and inhuman treatment meted out to the conspirators prior to their trial is entirely glossed over, thus whitewashing the Reconstruction government to a degree in that its positive actions at least seem solely political in motivation. However, from "The Birth of a Nation" on, films about the Reconstruction era have always raised ticklish problems and for the most part Ford handles his history both realistically and dramatically. Oddly enough though, Johnscott's screenplay makes no reference to the fact that Mudd's notoriety helped coin those two familiar phrases - "Here's mud in your eye" and "His name will be mud" - phrases that stuck permanently, even after Mudd was pardoned. The film opens with a beautifully constructed episode of Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theatre; in terms of its mixture of documentary reconstitution with pure filmic poetry I think it even surpasses the same sequence as done earlier, twice, by D.W. Griffith. The trial and execution sequences are likewise brilliantly handled, and if the later sequences, fine as they are, don't quite match up it's only because the Hollywood interweaving of showmanship with fact is a little less subtle; perhaps too because the grimness of the subject matter allows for less of the sentiment and warmth that were so much Ford's forte. But it remains a film of great personal style throughout, and is also quite a cunningly made film. Basically, it is a fairly inexpensive picture. There are few big or extravagant sets and, as in "The Informer," Ford covers this by using a lot of closeups and by staging most of his big exterior scenes at night. The film never once suggests this economy, and what we see of the sets always implies - by clever composition and lighting - that there's a great deal more beyond camera range. In terms of its cast the film is well-served too. That excellent actor Warner Baxter saves one of his best performances, and the cast is full of fine veterans and Ford "stock company" regulars. The basic pattern and cast of the following year's "Slave Ship" suggests that it may originally have been planned for Ford as an unofficial follow-up to this film. But Ford didn't direct, and Tay Garnett did, and "Slave Ship" is, even extremely interesting, never measured up to its potential. Certainly it never approached the greatness of "The Prisoner of Shark Island," which is easily the best Ford between "The Lost Patrol" of 1934, and "Young Mr. Lincoln" and "Stagecoach" of 1939. (And I'm not forgetting the important but surely much over-rated "The Informer").

William K. Everson