"CLEOPATRA" (Paramount 1934) Produced and directed by Cecil B. deMille

DeMille is far too interesting and complex a director - especially for his 1914-1919 period - for him to get the casual brushoff that notes for a film like "Cleopatra" may unavoidably suggest, but I'll have more to say about his earlier, serious, work in the introductory talk. "Cleopatra" is reasonably available on television, but it hasn't had any kind of theatrical exposure since 1952 - in later years, it had a tour of deference to the Taylor-Burton version; on television of course is no substitute for judging the assorted grandeur of this film! One could hardly find a more typical DeMille work, or a more enjoyable and harmless erotic one. It has all of his customary imbecillities and childishly simple "history", yet it has many of his virtues too. It certainly "moves" far more than "The Sign of the Cross", which took itself far too seriously and today seems an incredibly pedestrian film. The script of "Cleopatra" is an amazing melange of Shaw, William Shakespeare, a little history, and above all, DeMille. So he is accused of pillaging Shakespeare, he is accused of stealing Antony's speech in the Roman forum, he is accused of having false antecedents, and he is accused of falling short in showmanship he makes sure that it is referred to later. Ian Keith accuses Antony of being a theatrical ham: "You and your 'Friends, Romans and Countrymen' he berates him scornfully! Claudette Colbert makes a most alluring Cleopatra. Sometimes barely clad, moving with nimbus grace, she creates a marvellous siren if not a very Royal one. But as if recognising the futility of taking her lines seriously, she plays the role as though she were in the midst of a Lubitsch satire like "Forbidden Paradise". Warren "William, as always, is serious and dignified. C. Aubrey Smith has the same role as he played in "Queen Christina" to "The Prisoner of Zenda". No King - or Queen - ever had a more starchy and loyal right hand than Sir Aubrey! For the rest, the performances range from outrageous to the barely adequate. Perhaps the secret of the film's success is that DeMille took it all seriously and didn't realise that his cast was treating it all as a great romp. In any event, the chemistry seems to work. There are signs of some economy; some of the sets aren't as substantial as they might be, and there's even a hunk of stock footage lifted from the silent "The Ten Commandments". But the magnificent main title sequence rises one right away, and any other complaints are forgotten if not forgiven when deMille stages his big orgy/seduction scene. It is literally a three-ring circus, with suggested perversions, cat girls, a hoop of fire, and one of the most spectacular camera pull-backs in all movie history. If DeMille had had much more expensive and puerile idiosyncrasy in his other spectacles, they might have been much more entertaining than the average DeMille spectacle. "Cleopatra" was once considered one of his lesser films. Time, and the tedium of Miss Taylor's opus, have given more than vindicated it.

Preceding "Cleopatra" will be a reel of highlights from the climax of the 1932 "Sign of the Cross" (which offer a pace and a physical grandeur denied the rest of that rather plodding film) and an unwittingly hilarious one-reeler from 1931 entitled "Hollywood Extra Girl", designed as a disguised plug for "The Tireses". Clara Bow, Jean Arthur, Anna Sten and Suzanne Emery have the nominal leads, but the real star is DeMille himself, surveying his standard public image of great and dedicated master craftsman who is at the same time wise, benevolent and kindly. DeMille is a superb actor, and if only he had directed his films with the fervour that he here gives to showing of them, we should have had masterpieces indeed! Naively disregarding the admittedly boring mechanics of movie-making, we are shown DeMille shooting one take - which comes out fully scored and takes up down to long shots and close shots. Galloping on, DeMille casually asks his assistant to set it up again for a reverse angle trucking shot! With every deMille film a real gem, and with an ultra-schmaltzy wrap-up (ironically quite prophetic, since the young extra girl of the title never did get anywhere) "Hollywood Extra Girl" is a beautiful example of Hollywood projecting its world at the time - and that every word of it would be taken perfectly seriously.

--- William K. Everson ---