An Evening of Bizarre Melodrama with The Barrymores

"THE MAD GENIUS" (Warner Brothers, 1931) Directed by Michael Curtiz
Scenario by Harvey Thew and J. Grubb Alexander from "The Idol" by Martin Brown; Camera, Barney McGill; 61 minutes

Few sequels and/or remakes ever match the quality of their originals, many (like "Son of Kong" and "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls") being little more than quickies designed to cash in on the success of the earlier work. "The Mad Genius", rushed into production to exploit the unexpected popularity of "Svengali" (shown in our first series) lacks the Gothic quality and visual beauty of that remarkable film, but it is no quickie. Carefully produced, with elaborate sets and excellently constructed plot structure and triangle, even similar characterisation details - right down to Carmel Myers re-doing her standard misused mistress role from "Beau Brummel" and "Svengali". But if there had been no "Svengali", one would hardly feel inclined to quibble, for the film is still rich and enjoyable theatrical melodrama, often beautifully photographed and designed, directed by Curtiz with his usual pace and style, and superbly acted by Barrymore. Charles Butterworth's comedy interpolations are wisely placed in the service of the plot, their humor, and equally wisely, not too many attempts are made to convince us that Donald Cook is one of the world's great ballet dancers! The plot, not only an echo of "Svengali" but also something of a forerunner to "The Red Shoes", is laid in a curious kind of never-never-land of locale and time, and might have worked better wholly as a period piece. As it is, the occasional reminders that this is a contemporary story are just a little disturbing. These latter include the unexpected use of Cole Porter's "You Got That Thing" in one sequence -- but then Warners owned the music, and hadn't used it in their adaptation of "50 Million Frenchmen" so why not get their money's worth out of it by throwing it into a scene set in a cheap Paris dive?

----- INTERMISSION: 10 minutes ------

"THE DEVIL DOLL" (MG M, 1936) Directed by Tod Browning
Screenplay by Browning, Erich von Stroheim, Garrett Fort and Guy Endore from the novel "Burn "itch Burn" by Abraham Merritt;
Camera: Leonid Smith; 62 minutes

Tod Browning's second-from-last film shouldn't be confused with two much more recent British thrillers, a "Devil Doll" that has its inspiration in the ventriloquist sequence of "Dead of Night" and a "Burn Witch Burn" which derives not from Merritt's sci-fi novel but from Fritz Leiber's "Conjure Wife".

Browning's films have usually had one major flaw: a dynamic and bizarre opening that is both disturbing and attention-getting (and "Dracula" of course is the perfect illustration) and then a steady decline into stagey and talkative melodramation. Not a few of his films, and especially the silents "The White Tiger" and "The Show", noted for their lifeless opening scenes, are even contrived - at the halfway mark - to get all the characters locked up in a single room, so that the final denouements were claustrophobic as well as static. Quite certainly, he had a greater talent as a morbid, bizarre and ironic story-teller than as a film-maker; his films invariably carried far more promise and potential than they usually delivered. (One wonders how he might have fared teaming up with a director who took the opposite tack, starting slowly and then building steadily to a magnificent climax. A Browning collaboration with a John Ford or a D.W. Griffith might have been rewarding indeed!)

To an extent, "The Devil Doll" falls into some of his usual traps. The opening scenes are beautiful: mysterious abstract credits dissolving into a scene of eerie menace where that menace is not immediately identified. But thereafter, thanks no little to the
careful spacing of the big trick sequences, suspense and story values are maintained throughout. Considering the quartet of bizarre writers who collaborated on the screenplay, the fantastic story values are surprisingly restrained. There's a typical horror-film cliche when deranged scientist Henry B. Walthall delivers the standard "You think I'm mad?" speech, and a glorious moment shortly afterwards when Rafaela Ottiano promises "We'll make the whole world small!" - but for the most part, the not unworthy scientific experiment (though of dubious practical application) is treated in a generally non-wild and wacky manner. The photography, lighting, set design and matching of furniture etc. in the sequences with the "dolls" are all beautifully done, and infinitely superior to the cheaper, simpler work in the similar "Dr. Cyclops" and "The Incredible Shrinking Man".

Apart from mild echoes from "The Bride of Frankenstein" (the miniature people) there are more specific throwbacks to Browning's own "The Unholy Three" in Barrymore's masquerade as a kindly old woman. (It's a pity that the inspiration didn't extend to Ethel Barrymore playing the role of this masquerade, since Lionel's voice would hardly fool anyone!) Unfortunately, one can only conjecture as to Stroheim's participation in the script. Individual moments have very much of a Stroheim look, particularly the idea of having tragedy and evil played out against a Christmas tinsel motif (something he did in both "Greed" and "Walking Down Broadway") while the detective's line "The city is full of religious fanatics around Christmas!" also sounds like a typically sour Stroheim line. Most of all there is the question of final atonement: although the climax seems rather gentle, especially by 1936 post-Code standards, examination of the film shows that everybody more than pays for his sins, if not legally then certainly morally; and again, this excessive expiation was always a Stroheim characteristic. But - to be fair - it must be stressed that these are mere guesses; knowing how MGM worked in those days, it is wholly possible that Stroheim's contribution to the final film was minimal. Coincidentally, as with all films that Stroheim was associated with, there are signs of post-production tampering. The voice of Hilfrid Lucas (an actor otherwise not in the film) is several times used to dub voice-over lines for players who are off-screen, or whose backs are to the camera.

Wm. K. Everson

For your information: The remaining films in this series:

Program #5: October 30: Soap-operas with style, pre and post Production Code; Claudette Colbert in "Torch Singer" (1933, Alexander Hall) and Kay Francis in "I Found Stella Parish" (1935, Nervyn LeRoy)

#6: Nov.6: "DON JUAN" (1926, Alan Crosland) A complete print, with the original score, of the John Barrymore classic swashbuckler; and Lupino Lane's "At Sword's Point" (1928), an equally classic two-reel spoof.

#7: "BLOOD MONEY" (1933) Rowland Brown's third and last film as a director; crisp yet comic gangster film, with George Bancroft, Judith Anderson, Frances Dee; "WHAT PRICE HOLLYWOOD?" (1932, written by Brown, directed by George Cukor), precursor to "A Star Is Born", with Constance Bennett, Neil Hamilton, Lowell Sherman.

#8: "THE CHURCH MOUSE" (1935), a charming, risque, comedy that is too little known; Laura LaPlante, Ian Hunter; "THE GREATEST QUESTION" (1920), a lovely Lillian Gish-D.W. Griffith film; and a 1930 filmed interview with Griffith

#9: Dec.4: "THAT CERTAIN THING" (1928), an extremely rare silent Frank Capra comedy with Viola Dana; "UPPERWORLD" (1934), a mature Ben Hecht story, with Warren William, Mary Astor, Ginger Rogers.