
"SIX HOURS TO LIVE" (Fox, 1932) Directed by William Dieterle
Scenario by Bradley King from the original story "Auf Wiedersehen" by Gordon Morris and Morton Bateaux; Camera, John Seitz;
Music, Louis de Francesco; 8 reels

Despite the many similar titles which might suggest familiarity ("One Hour to Live", "Four Hours to Kill", "12 Hours to Live", "Two Hours to Live"), there is little likelihood that you have seen "Six Hours to Live" since its initial release. It has never been reissued, nor made available to television, and is the kind of thoroughly worthwhile and unjustly obscured film that has always been the basic raison d'etre for our film series. I purposely don't want to say too much about it, in the sheer surprise value of delivering the last East of forty years to such an unknown quantity is a delirium itself. Suffice it to say that it has enough plot substance for a dozen movies, and enough production technique for a dozen more. Perhaps it might benefit from a little more subtlety or plot selectivity, but in the face of such riches, it seems churlish to complain. It was one of six films that Dieterle directed in 1932, after making his debut as a director only the year before with "The Last Flight", shown in a prior series. It's the most Germanic of all of his early Hollywood films, perhaps because for the first time he has a thoroughly European theme to back up his romantic and expressionist views. There's perhaps a dominant influence of Fritz Lang, although it's warmer and less nightmareish than Lang ever was. "Thiller" is perhaps too loose a description to be wholly apt since it overlaps into many genres and once or twice even strays dangerously near predictable soap-opera set-ups. But science-fiction, with some elaborate laboratory scenes, is certainly a major motif; curiously - perhaps as an offshoot of experimental work in rocketry, radio and television - science-fiction sub-plots find their way into a great many movies of the late 20's and early 30's. Photographically, "Six Hours to Live" is extremely imaginative, while the production itself is quite extraordinarily handsome, using larger sets and bigger crowd scenes than a film of its modest boxoffice expectations would seem to have justified.

----- 10 minute intermission -----

"WHERE EAST IS EAST" (SKW, 1929) Produced and directed by Tod Browning
Story by Tod Browning and Harry Sinclair Drago, adapted by Waldemar Young and Richard Schayer; Camera, Henry Sharp; Art Director, Cedric Gibbons; Titles, Joe Farnham; 7 reels
MUSIC ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART ODEMAN

The Tod Browning silents, and particularly those with Lon Chaney, present something of an enigma. Long a legend, long unavailable, they have now put in a partial reappearance; the more one sees of them, the more one realises how over-rated they were, and how under-rated Browning's talkies were. We'll have more time to discuss this after the movie this evening; suffice it to say at this point that I pre-screened - and rejected - several other Browning's and selected this one on the basis that its plot alone would make it one of the best of the batch. Alas, it isn't. It's the kind of slowly-paced, obvious, larger-than-life melodrama (clearly influenced by "The Shanghai Gesture") that many people wrongly assume to be typical of the silent film. It's full of coincidence and heavy-breathing passion, but has less real cinema than any given ten feet of "Six Hours to Live"; it is also, like most Browning-Chaneys, strictly formula. There is lavish production in terms of sets and camerawork, sitting cheek-by-jowl with obvious economics such as near-amateurish back projection. HOWEVER - I have a very strong suspicion that it needs an audience (and air conditioning - balmy summer heat) and while those two ingredients can't turn this into a good film, they may well make it an extremely enjoyable one. Chaney is far superior to his material, the girls act like real trouper, there's a wild finale that borrows both from Edgar Allen Poe and Erich von Stroheim, and the whole film has that unhealthy morbidity so typical of Browning and Chaney. We can discuss this at greater length after the screening, so let me just conclude by remarking that, like "Six Hours to Live", "Where East is East" has not been seen since its original release (it premiered at the Capitol Theatre) when it was quickly lost in the shuffle of the changeover to sound.

----- William K. Everson -----