Josef von Sternberg - 1939-1944

Perhaps it should be stressed at the outset that tonight's program is not designed to show the best of Von Sternberg (fortunately, his once elusive Dietrich films for Paramount in the early 30's are now reasonably available at all times) but to illuminate, via seldom revived films, that curious period of his career when he seemed on the verge of a comeback as a major director. After 1944, he "retired" again however, to return for only three more films: "Juno" (1952), "Anastasia" (1954) and the long in production and thus virtually unseeable "Jet Pilot" with John Wayne.

"THE TOWN" (Office of War Information, 1944) One reel

Like so many wartime and government-sponsored documentaries, "The Town" is saddled with a rather unctuous (and now dated, through years of repetition) narration. Its opening sentences are typical, with an attempt to persuade us that what could obviously only be a sleepy and charming little Mid-West town could easily (by virtue of its design, its architecture, its people) pass for a European town. But no matter; its propaganda value is in any case past, and what we are left with now is a charming little film of the "city symphony" school, with carefully composed and lit images rare in this kind of film. Since Sternberg often expressed his contempt for actors, it's surprising in a way that he didn't make more documentaries like this, where he could concentrate on images alone, using people literally for their face-value and no more.

"SERGEANT KADEN" (MGH, 1939) Directed by Josef von Sternberg
Produced by J. Walter Ruben; Screenplay by Wells Root from an original story by William A. Ullman; Camera, John Seitz; 82 minutes

After the unfinished "I Claudius" for Korda in England, von Sternberg's return to MGH (where he had not worked since the late 20's) was seen as a chance to renew the reputation - and the films - that had faltered since the cessation of his Dietrich-Paramount films. Unfortunately, the MGH liaison proved to be an unhappy experience; he worked briefly on a number of pictures (including "I Take this Woman") before being replaced by other directors, and "Sergeant Kaden" was the only film to emerge from his MGH sojourn. Since he despised both sentiment and films geared as vehicles to actors of Beery's type (and since Beery too was known for being obstinate and belligerent with directors), Sternberg must have disliked working on the film, and later often expressed the opinion that it was one of his weaker pictures. From his own personal point of view it undoubtedly was, but it still has a great deal of interest, and since it is now one of the least-known of all the Sternberg films, we need make no apologies for showing it.

In view of today's headlines, the film is an interesting throwback to the typical Hollywood conception of the cop on the beat - sentimental, self-sacrificing almost to the point of lunacy, respecting (to a degree) the underworld's own code of honor, but never betraying his own integrity. Moreover his father and his father before him had been honest cops too, and approximately 60% of the force seemed to be Irish. It also helped to have two sons, one of whom could turn bad and thus conveniently embody the climactic ratio of Vice, corruption and killer-instinct which one felt was injected into New York's finest only to provide a little dramatic license.

A bit slow and sentimental in getting under way, "Sergeant Kaden" eventually turns into a rousing crime melodrama, helped along by a good (type) cast, and by Von Sternberg's own lush visual style - in this case enhanced by the work of John Seitz, one of Hollywood's best cameramen. The dialogue may be old-fashioned, theatrical and occasionally stilted, but never the visuals. The interiors of the Kaden home are beautifully lit, and when the family goes to the docks to meet an immigrant from Ireland, the Cunard line has some seemingly inappropriate fishnets hanging from the rafters to provide appropriate framing for a typically atmospheric Sternberg-track-shot! And of course, when a hoodlum ducks off...
the street into a deserted warehouse, the set design, the lighting and
the camera mobility make us feel that the old von Sternberg had never been
away! Despite its minimal importance as a Sternberg film, it's still
a thoroughly professional and in its own hokey way enjoyable film — its
limited merits perhaps even exaggerated by the lack of even the rudiments
of that professionalism in most of today's films.

-- Ten minute intermission --

"THE SHANGHAI GESTURE" (United Artists, 1941) Directed by Josef von
Sternberg; produced by Arnold Pressburger; Associate producer,
Albert de Courville; camera, Paul Ivano; Sets, Boris Leven; music
composed and conducted by Richard Hageman; adapted by Josef von
Sternberg, Gera Herzog, Karl Vallicheller and Julius Porterman from
the play by John Colton; 105 minutes.

At one time considered an interesting but lesser Sternberg, "The Shanghai
Gesture" increasingly seems like one of his best films -- and certainly
the only really successful "serious story film" that he had made since
"The Blue Angel". Most of his films of course, and rightly so, concentrated
on style rather than content, and when he moved into the "respectable
literary field", with "Crime and Punishment", the results were seldom
very satisfying. So in "The Shanghai Gesture" was the last
authentic Sternberg film. Much of the credit (for its existence, if not
for its individuality) should go to producer Arnold Pressburger who, in
the early 40's, had the wit and commercial courage to give directors like
von Sternberg, Rene Clair and Fritz Lang their heads in decidedly off-beat
material. A notorious play and a watered-down silent film, "The Shanghai
Gesture" ran into inevitable scripting and censorship problems which were
side-stepped rather neatly. It may be a compromise of sorts to change
Kothe God-Bann to Mother Gin Sling, and to disguise a brothel as a
gambling casino, but it's not hard to read between the lines. As an essay
in concentrated corruption and decadence, the film is still pretty hard-
hitting stuff, and for 1941, when this kind of fare was temporarily quite
alien to the screen, it was exceptionally strong meat. There really isn't
a sympathetic person in the entire film -- and the ones that are at least
likeable (Phyllis Brooks, as the snowgirl for example) make one feel
uneasy since one knows that the corruption is still there, even if one is
seduced by a winning facade. Quite incidentally, the character of Dr. Omar
was not present in the original play, and is a useful invention of von
Sternberg's: surely one of the most evil characters ever created for film
(or literature either, for that matter), and constantly subjected to
intense sallow, droopy-eyed closeups which turn Victor Jary's normally
rather unengaging features to a definite if unflattering dramatic
advantage. Poetically the film — dominated by the marvellous gambling
casino set with its "into the inferno" symbolism — is always interesting,
not least in the photography of the principals; characters. Osa Marion's
makeup inevitably recalls Dietrich, the supporting players are chosen
primarily for their facial characteristics (some of them fail a little
flat dramatically, such as a bartender burdened with rather heavy-handed
Sternbergian philosophies and humor), and Gene Tierney was never
photographed better — nor did she ever again give such a good performance.
Phyllis Brooks too, usually wasted in "B" films, rises to the occasion —
and Sternbergian inspiration extremely well.

"The Shanghai Gesture" was carefully re-edited (not with any great
damage, though some minor nuggets were removed) for a later release, but
tonight's print is fully complete. Apart from a perhaps unavoidable
concentration on talk in the last "act" and a corresponding lessening
of visual splendour, it's still a powerful and wholly representative
Sternberg film, and one wonders why it has for so long been treated with
casual respect but very little real enthusiasm.

The list of players was omitted from the credits above; here it is:
Gene Tierney, Victor Jary, Walter Huston, Osa Marion, Phyllis Brooks,
Albert Basserman, Maria Osipenskaya, Eric Blore, Mike Mazurki, Iven
Lebedeff, Clyde Fillmore, Rex Evans, Grayce Hampton, Michael Dellmoff,
Marcel Dalio, Mikhail Rasumny, John Abbott.

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