"THE MIRACLE OF THE WOLVES" (Films Historique, 1923/24)

Directed by Raymond Bernard; Assistant Director, Jean Hemard;
Scenario by Paul Antoine from the novel by Henry Dupuy-Manzel;
2 hours, 25 minutes.

The Cast: Jean Fouquet (Yvonne Sery); The Dauphin (Charles Dullin);
Phillip the Good (Mailly); Charles the Bold (Vanni-Narcy); Robert
Cotteareux (Ronvail Joube); Fouquet (Haupain); Tristan the Hermit (Philippe
Heraut); Lord of Chateauvieux (Gaston Nodot).

Piano Score arranged and played by STUART ODERHAN
Raymond Bernard, son of romantic novelist Tristan Bernard, intended this
film as the first of a series of historical spectacles. It opened at the
Paris Opera, with the president and cabinet in attendance, and was the
best - and best-received - of what was to be a short-lived "series". Abel
Gance and "Napoleon" somewhat stole Bernard's thunder, and reduced his
ambitions - although he remained in the field of historical and costume
films, and in the early thirties made one of the best versions of "Les
Miserables". As a spectacle, "The Miracle of the Wolves" is a staggering
and levity epigraph. With the medieval castle of Carcassonne as one of its
principal backgrounds, the film is a magnificent piece of historical
imagination that we've seen short of the Babylonian sequence in Griffith's
"Intolerance", with
hordes of extras, obviously authentic costumes, armor, weaponry and overall
decor - and largely unfamiliar players adding to the realism of the whole.
Moreover, despite its insistence on filling us in (via titles) on all of the
details of political and court intrigue and a necessarily slow opening,
it gets into the swing of action quite quickly and is unshrouding in its
movement and violent warfare. No Cecil B. deMille or Frank Lloyd tableaux
have ever been played for all the excitement and showmanship possible!
It covers the familiar contretemps between King Louis and the Burgundians,
which most of us know mainly in restrained, pantomimic, semi-comedic and
operatic form thanks to the Francois Villon legend which has virtually
monopolized this period on the screen. Here, however, M. Villon is not even
mentioned, and King Louis, in the hands of Charles Dullin (an excellent
actor still going strong in such late-40's French films as "Les Yeux Sont
Faits") is far less of a grotesque than as played by Basil Rathbone,
Conrad Veidt orFully Marshall.

More than anything else however - and more even than such films as the
Swedish "The Atonement of Costa Berling" - the film is a prime example of
the influence of D.W. Griffith on film-makers abroad. Everything about it
indicates a thorough study and absorption of Griffith's methods: the
construction (opening prologue, introduction and interweaving of
characters, the lovers kept apart by differing social status, the build-up
to the first climax, temporary respite, then a steady acceleration of pace
to the second climax); the staging of the battle scenes (mass action cutting
to individual action, details of the loading and usage of weapons,
interweaving of motivations between King Louis and the Burgundians);
the panoramic long shot, the panel shot. Individual scenes can readily be traced
in their inspiration; Lilian Gish on the ice in "Way Down East" is
here, as is Brown Eyes' rape by the mercenary in "Intolerance". Perhaps the
climax with its race to the rescue and its monumental battle scenes goes
just a shade too far in not knowing when to call a halt. (Griffith, faced
with a similar problem in "The Birth of a Nation", introduced a few seconds
of levity at the height of the tension to relax his audience, and then
started in on the battle again.) But if Bernard borrows from Griffith, who heartedly
from Griffith, he also introduces original material which itself would be
influence on later directors. The attack of the wolves on the frozen
river is not only an astonishing piece of film-making (savage by today's
standards, much more so by the standards of the 20's) but also suggests
that Eisenstein had it at least partially in mind when he staged his battle on
the ice in "Alexander Nevsky" more than a decade later. The use of the
hand-held and subjective camera and his sequence is also quite remarkable for
the time. It is the conclusion of the opening episode where the director,
Raymond Bernard, comes from his original negative and is in excellent
condition. Photographically - in terms of lighting, composition, clarity -
it is a stunning production, apart from a strange stress on dissolves ---
"strange" because either the cameramen or the laboratories never seem able
to master them, and come up with a jerky quality that calls attention to
the device.

I apologise in advance for the rather academic form of presentation - the
reading of a translation of the French subtitles over the film. While the
basic action of the film is fairly easy to follow, the documentation of
historical fact is important too, and can only be obtained from the titling -
and there is such a plethora of them (in the first half of the film) that
the cost of making English titles to insert would be prohibitive. Ironically
when the film opened at the New York Criterion in 1925, the NY Times
criticised the English titles for being vague and hurriedly written. -MKR-