THE NEW SCHOOL FILM SERIES Twenty: Program #5. December 6 1974

THE MAN WHO DARED (Fox, 1935) Directed by Hamilton MacFadden; story and screenplay by Dudley Nichols and Jamar Trott; Camera, Arthur Miller; Min. With Preston Foster, Zita Johann, Jean Marché, Irene Miller, Clifford Jones, June Willy, John Long; Directed by Leon Ames; Douglas Corrigan, Douglas Dumbrille, Frank Sheridan, Matt McHugh, Leonid Snegoff, Jay Ward.

Political drama ("The Best Man", "Advice and Consent"), political satire ("The Dark Horse", "The Great McGinty") and political biography ("Welles", "Eisenstein") have always proven to be commercially somewhat dubious, and unless their Hollywood vocation into Ammunition or the stories of Lincoln films, the results have been satisfying both critically and at the boxoffice. "The Man Who Dared", officially a very loose biography "inspired" by the story of Chicago's assassinated Mayor Anton Cermak, actually sticks to the facts rather more carefully than many bio-films claiming fidelity. At the time it was quite a rare present. Now that the various have so fully informed the public on the mechanics of politics, it has been shown to have such links with melodrama, fantasy, comedy and - currently - bedroom farce that we can expect Hollywood's utilisation of political scenario to be both more frequent and more outspoken. (In fact, this has already come to pass) In any case, "The Man Who Dared" is even more interesting as a kind of unofficial forerunner of the "rise and fall" type of political biography exemplified by "Citizen Kane" and "All the King's Men". It's a courageous undertaking, let down only by the (very important) shortcomings of director and star. Arthur Miller's fine camerawork is a major asset, and the production lacks nothing in terms of care, production mounting, and convincing establishment of milieu. But Hamilton MacFadden, a routine director of "B" pictures, is quite out of his depth. Why on earth wasn't the property given to John Ford who would have been ideal for it, and was a Fox contract star at the time. At that time. Years after the war, he was the very most of a restricted talent, and was a useful actor, but he was never a major actor. Again one wonders why Ford didn't assign the role to contractee Spencer Tracy - whose "The Power and the Glory", made a year later, was not unrelated. However, it's easy to re-cast and give advice 40 years later; it's much fairer to be grateful that such an off-beat little picture was made at all. One can certainly be grateful too for the chance to see, in a good cut, that intelligent and graceful actress Zita Johann. One wonders why her career has been so overshadowed by historiats; apart from her own talent, her recollections of the directors she worked with (Griffith, Freund and Hawks among them) would be fascinating.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

MR. WU (MGM, 1927) Directed by William Nigh; Scenario by Lorna Moon from the 1924 play by Maurice Vernon and Harold Owen; Camera, John Arnold; Sets, Cedric Gibbons and Richard Day; NY Premiere, Capital Theatre (with "Madame Butterfly" excerpts as a stage presentation); 80 minutes

With Lon Chaney, Louise Dresser, Renee Adorac, Ralph Forbes, Gertrude Olmstead, Mrs. Wong Wing, Anna May Wong, Claude King. PLAYED BY STUART ODERMAN

By now the myth of the greatness of the MGM-Chaney's has been thoroughly demolished, although the Goldwyn-Chaneys of the earlier period are something else again. Thus it is unlikely that many of you are expecting a great deal of "Mr. Wu"; it is enough that it is a very rare Chaney and one that is good to see for itself. It is a straightforward and unimaginative film, it is dramatically more satisfying (if less subtle) than the Browning films. At least it moves steadily if ponderously to a definite climax and is colorful throughout even though somewhat toned down from the original play and the earlier film (a 1919 British version with - who else? - Matheson Lang). For 1927, a period when Hollywood was turning out some of its greatest movies, it is surprisingly primitive in some ways, with little camera movement or real editing. The sets are interesting, the camerawork glossy, the characterisation rich, but it certainly doesn't look like a film made in the same year as "Sunrise". Director William Nigh - a colorful well-dressed "dandy" - was actually more at home with more actionful fare, such films as the excellent silent "The Fire Brigade" or the much later talkie "Mr. Wong, Detective". However, the MGM Chaney's were so successful that it's understandable in a way that they were so formulised and turned out so frequently and so cheaply. But it's a pity too, for Chaney's unique pantomimic talents were thus wasted at a time when he was personally at his peak. The film is also an interesting example of the many "Yellow Peril" films that proliferated in the 20's, and care is taken that Chaney's sympathetic role be balanced by sympathetic ones. The East-West confrontations produce some subtitles of superbly tasteless racism, and it is unfortunately impossible to look at Renee Adorac's performance as Nang Ping without recalling Ruby Keeler's Shanghai Lil from "Footlight Parade".

(SPRING SEMESTER AYATIARTS NEXT WEEK) William K. Everson