Two early silents by Cecil B. deMille

Music for both features arranged and played by Stuart Oderman

THE CHEAT (Famous Players-Lasky, 1915) Produced, directed and edited by Cecil B. deMille; Original story and scenario by Hector Turnbull; Camera, Maurice Setoff; 5 reels.

With Nannie Ward (Edith Hardy); Jack Dean (Dick Hardy); Susse Hayakawa (Tori); James Neill (Jones); Utake Abe (Tori's valet); Dana Ong (District Attorney); Hazel Childers (Mrs Reynolds); and Raymond Hatton, George Kuwa.

Cecil B. deMille was nothing if not prolific in the pre-1920 period; "The Cheat" was already his 17th feature in less than two years! The deMille of these years is quite different from the slower-paced and more heavy-handed deMille of the sex farces of the early 20's, and the historical spectacles of later years. Quite certainly this is his best period, purely as a director, and entirely true to fact; historians and critics are wont to give him based on their knowledge of his later films. Virtually all of his early films are based on popular plays, but transposed to the screen with a larger-than-life vitality and a theatrical bravura achieved mainly through dynamic lighting. "The Cheat" actually was an original story, not a play, yet it is handled like theatre. The few "big" scenes - the garden party, the ultra-crowded trial scene seem almost like typical attempts to "open up" a play, while the key narrative is handled at close quarters by the three principals. Although deMille didn't invent the kind of lighting used here (he often tried to suggest that he did, though actually one can find precedents for it in much earlier Griffith films) he certainly was the first to exploit it as both an artistic adjunct to his films, and as a kind of personal trademark. The lighting here is dramatic and effective, even in thin, extremely opaque, almost black and white prints, with all the déhanché and panache of the original 35mm release prints. It was even more impressive! The subject matter is very strong meat for 1915, and shows that even that early deMille was well aware of the showmanship possibilities of sex and sadism. The film is also (unintentionally) an astonishing mirror to the yellow peril racism of the day. The Burmese villain is actually quite a sympathetic chap, ill-used and exploited by the shallow heroine. His one act of violence towards the heroine, while admittedly expected. The New York Times called it "sensational trash", but still, somewhat grudgingly, gave it a good review. The film was remade twice in this country, once in 1923 with Pola Negri, and again as an early talkie with Tallulah Bankhead. There was also a third remake in France later in the 30's, with Susse Hayakawa repeating his original role. (A not dissimilar British stage melodrama, "The Chinese Bungalow", was also filmed three times in England. Incidentally, you will notice this is quite an understatement (nearly good) for this 1912; these were merely inserted in a later reissue to downplay the film's age. - Ten Minute Intermission -

THE WHISPERING CHORUS (Famous Players-Lasky-Paramount, 1918) Produced and Directed by Cecil B. deMille; an Artcraft Production; scenario by Jeanne Macpherson from a novel by Perley Poore Shehan; Camera, Alvin Wyckoff; Art Director, Wilfrid Buckland; edited by deMille; 6 reels.

With Raymond Hatton (John Trimble); Kathryn Williams (Jane Trimble); Edythe Chapman (Mother Trimble); Elliott Dexter (George Coggeswell); Noah Beery (Longshoreman); Guy Oliver (McFarland); John Burton (Charles Barden); J. Parkes Jones (Tom Burns); Tully Marshall (Clumley); W. H. Brown (Staubermy); James Neill (Channing); Julia Faye (Waterfront girl); Gustav von Seyffertitz, Walter MacCoppin (Trelease)...

"deMille's first two films may well represent a kind of artistic zenith for him; "Whispering Chorus" was powerful, extremely well reviewed, and became deMille's most spectacular commercial failure to that date, while "Old Wives for New" which followed within two months was, and is, notable for a sophisticated editing pattern which predates and parallels Bergman's flashback devices in "Wild Strawberries". In its combination of "Young Arden" and "Stella Dallas" plots, with a touch of "Scarlett Street" in there too - it could have been over-wrought and artificial, and certainly "Whispering Chorus" can't altogether escape the accusation of being old-fashioned melodrama, but the acting and especially the camerawork make it a remarkable film for early 1918. Oddly, the critics were quite biased against its photographic expertise, referring to "the usual tricks of double exposure", indicating that there must have been "lost lights" or "over-screening", or something similar. Although I have a First Two 1918 FILMS...

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