MGM was a studio always very conscious of its image and prestige. Even when it made smaller and less ambitious films, either as companion-features to their bigger prestige pictures, to accommodate a specific market, they strove to maintain the MGM look in them. This often gave added quality, production and star value to virtual "B" pictures, but on the other hand it also over-inflated little films that had no delusions of grandeur, and robbed them of spontaneous charm or a vigorous pacing. Tonight's two films are not necessarily meant to represent either of these two extremes although there are plus and minus factors in both films but they do illustrate the very real quality that went into the relatively "unimportant" MGM films, many of which turned out to be far more entertaining than their big prestige films and star vehicles.

THE WRONG WAY OUT (MGM, 1938) Directed by Gustav Machaty; original story and screenplay, Karl Lamb; Camera, Paul Vogel; from the "Crime Does Not Pay" series; 20 minutes.

Between 1935 and 1947, MGM made 48 two-reelers in the "Crime Does Not Pay" series. It was one of the best (and most handsomely) produced series on the market, backed by all the MGM resources and contract players and film-makers. It gave some interesting newcomers (such as Robert Taylor) their first breaks, and was also a remarkable training ground for new (or imported) directors, among them Jacques Tourneur, Fred Zinnemann, Joe Losey and Joseph Newman. Few of them were out-and-out cops-and-robbers thrillers, but there was a concentration instead on exposing small-time racketeers by which the public was easily fleeced, or on themes of some social value, where the public could—or should—become involved.

Tonight's entry, #20 in the series, is a very good cross-section of the whole. It represented the American directorial debut of Gustav Machaty, director of the then-notorious (and still unreleased in the U.S.) Undead Flesh and interesting British film "Eirtse". Apart from a few one-note and rather wearing gags, "Eirtse" is "Jealousy", his Hollywood Maglou was never out of the ground, yet from this initial short he seems to have both adjusted to Hollywood studio work, and yet at the same time retained some of the rich, flambayont pictorial qualities of his European work. Its plot is a little "laid out" much in the manner of Lang's "You Only Live Once" of the year before, but that was a characteristic of all the series. Most of them like this one, were written by Karl Lamb, and one would hope the complex if not the 20 minutes, and arouse the public conscience when need be. It was necessary to adopt shock tactics rather than subtler ones. (One of the series, incidentally, seemed to be turning out so well that it was expanded into a feature!)


LAST OF THE FAGANS (MGM, 1935) Directed by Richard Thorpe; produced by Phil Goldstone; Original story and screenplay, John Farrow; Camera, Clyde de Vinna; Musical score, Nathaniel Pimentel; Polysemian dialogue with English subtitles; 72 mins.

With Mala, Dobus, Charles Trowbridge, Robert O. Davis, Chester Gan.

"Last of the Fagans" is a curiosity indeed. It's as though MGM were trying to milk the last drop of value from their once prestidigious and popular series of poetic quasi-documentary romances—"White Shadows in the South Seas", "Eskimo" etc. —and at the same time write them off permanently. Had they thought the potential had to be used up before they would never have given it to Phil Goldstone, one of the several poverty-row independent producers that MGM tried out briefly. (Nat Levine was another; the experiments never worked, such producers being bemused by their new largesse and never managing to adjust to a new modus operandi). Yet, unimportant or not, "Last of the Fagans" was an MGM film and had to look like one. As a result, it is neither fish nor fowl. Its plot has also some elements of social conscience, albeit it is rather time-honored one of the white exploitation of simple islanders and a corruption of their way of life. But it is quite inconsistent even within its own boundaries: the whites are initially vicious, then suddenly sympathetic when plot contrivances call for it, and then callous again. It is also too melodramatic to be taken entirely seriously. The result: much too classy and intelligent a film to fill the traditional "B" action market; and yet a film which, with those elements to qualify as any kind of serious film, but they do illustrate the inter-relationship of John Farrow, who directed, Mala, stars in the current and apparently quite awful remake of "The Hurricane". Some rather cheap and obvious island "exteriors" done in the studio indicate a degree of tolerance from quickie producer Goldstone that a regular MGM producer would not have stood still for, but luckily there's far more genuine location work that it's a not a major liability. And it's a fairly brisk film too, helped on its way by a lively and flavorsome musical score. It premiered in New York at the Astor Theatre —where so many big MGM prestige films had opened —but the reason for the booking was, in this case, not prestige, but the fact that it seemed a good "escapist" film to show at the height of a bitter Winter!
STARS IN MY CROWN ( MGM, 1950) Directed by Jacques Tourneur; produced by William H. Wright; Screenplay by Margaret Fitts from an original story by Joe David Brown; Camera, Charles Schoenbaum; Music, Adolph Deutsch; 89 mins.
DeWalt Reynolds, Buddy Roosevelt, Lina Mitchell.
A few years ago the Royal Film Archive in Belgium polled a number of American critics and historians on what they considered to be the major "unappreciated" American films. (The results, quite fascinating and informative, have been printed in limited-edition form by the Archive, which is trying to find an American publisher.) "Stars in My Crown" is a film that figured quite prominently in the voting.

There was a time, in the 40's and 50's particularly, when films like "Stars in My Crown" turned up, if not with frequency, then at least with some regularity. Hollywood was still a mass-production-oriented industry in those days, and with the dearth of the Will Rogers type films, there was a need for films designed primarily for rural and small town audiences. Making films specifically for a given audience is no guarantee of quality of course, but the kind of films that Hollywood thought rural America wanted was at least fairly simple and economical, the returns guaranteed to bring in enough of a profit to justify them. A lot of junk was turned out — including of course such obvious items as the Ma and Pa Kettle series — but every so often a film would come along with just the right combination of sentiment and restrained religion to strike a note of pleasing sincerity — films like "One Foot in Heaven" from Warners, "I'd Climb the Highest Mountain" and "Wait Till the Sun Shines Nellie" from Fox, and "Some Next Spring" and "The Sun Shines Bright" from Republic.

"Stars in My Crown" is very much a film in this mould, clearly made by a director and stars who had genuine affection for it. It's a relaxed and leisurely movie, perhaps a little bit too cut out from a formula pattern in that its various problems come to a head in time to provide a neatly-intertwoven mass solution for the climax but on the whole far more restrained, and less preachy, than one would have expected from an MGM film during the Schary regime. One would have perhaps liked a little less sweetness and light at the end, and for at least a token bit of cranky to have remained in the form of Ed Begley, whose reformation seems a little unlikely. Certainly the newly-stabilised little post-Olivier war town must have been a dreadfully dull place to live in after Joel McCrea and Juano Hernandez got through with it — but those are problems of a sequel, not of this film.

One can quibble at occasional signs of MGM image-conscientiousness. The art direction makes the town's wooden buildings, if not over-elaborate, at least a little too new and clean. And the musical score, though generally restrained, does occasionally overdue the interpolated religious choruses at moments of triumph. On the other hand, the matching up of studio "exterior" with the live production is excellent done. The cast has some interesting covenas from old-timers — Lewis Stone is particularly good in his big scene - plus the presence of a few newcomers, including those eventual "Gunsmoke" co-stars, Jim Arness and Amanda Blake. I haven't read the original novel from which the film was made so don't know if the voice-over device, putting the whole film into flashback, comes from that or not. Whether or not it does, the opening narrative of the film does seem rather blatantly borrowed from the opening of "How Green Was My Valley"; some phrases seem almost identical, although the tone is more joyful and doesn't represent the sense of loss and sadness so apparent in the Ford film. Quite incidentally, the narration was originally spoken by Lionel Barrymore, but wisely was re-done with Marshall Thompson. (One can imagine Dean Stockwell growing up into Thompson, but not into Barrymore! Although it's sad to think of the Dean Stockwell of the MGM years growing up into the Dean Stockwell of American International and films like "Psyche-Out"!)

Jacques Tourneur was essentially a director of thrillers — an innovative maker of stylish horror films ("Cat People", "Curse of the Demon") and an excellent imitator of the styles of Hitchcock and Lang. He also had a penchant for American and Westerns, and worked well with Joel McCrea in a number of films. Like his father, Maurice Tourneur, he had an eye for composition, a relaxed composition however without the sense of strong design that marked similar John Ford films. (Oddly, "Stars in My Crown" isn't as dynamic as "The Sun Shines Bright"). Although hardly a great film or even one of his very best, "Stars in My Crown" is obviously the work of a man who loves movie-making, and is grateful for a chance to work on really worth-while material — a chance that he doesn't spoil by loading the film with an over-abundance of technique.

Program ends: 10,50

William K. Everson