Sheiks and Rajahs -- and a blow against Women's Lib!

FAZIL (Fox, 1927) Produced and Directed by Howard Hawks; From the play "L'Insoumise" by Pierre Frondaie and the English adaptation "Prince Fazil"; adapted by Philip Klein. Art Direction, William S. Darling; Associate Director, James Talmage; Musical score arranged by S.L. Rothafel, and directed by Erno Rapee; 70 mins.

Dedicated auteurs will be rather hard-pressed to find typical Haysian ingredients of either story, characters or style (apart from its overall masculinity) in this tongue-in-Sheik romp. One of the plethora of exotic Eastern romances that followed in the wake of "The Sheik" and were renewed with the success of "Son of the Sheik", it casts Charles Farrell not very convincingly as an Arab chieftain, and pits him rather pleasingly against Grete Nissen. The marvellously flamboyant opening establishes the wrong note: one can't help prepared to enjoy its jovial lechery and general exoticism, only to have it turn serious without one being really aware of it, so that there is no preparation for the emotionalism of the climax, and it just isn't as moving or exciting as it might be. Definitely in its favor however is its short and snappy pacing, its handsome and luxurious production mountings, and above all its richly flavorful musical score. All of this technique may be arguably wasted on fairly spacious plot material. The whole film has the look of a Victorian pornographic novel from which the pornography has been removed, and the harem scenes retain a certain erotic quality. Women's groups will doubtless find the film horrendous, but conversely upholders of Male Supremacy will applaud much of the modus operandi of the barbaric East. Rediscovered masterwork, it certainly isn't, but in any event it's good to welcome another lost sheik back to the fold. It's also a sobering reminder that not all of the "officially" lost films can materially change recorded film history when rediscovered, tho' they do have their place in filling in odd chronological gaps.

— Ten Minute Intermission —

THE GREEN GODDESS (Warner Brothers 1929; rel: 1930) Directed by Alfred E. Green; Screenplay by Julien Josephson from the play by William Archer; Camera, James Van Trees; 73 mins.

"The Green Goddess" was the very first Arliss film that we played in our very first series. We have written so much about Arliss's style, and his career, in subsequent notices for all the other Arliss films that we've shown since, that there is no point in repetition at this stage. (To newcomers, I refer to an article of mine on Arliss that appeared in the April 1979 issue of "Films in Review").

In many ways, "The Green Goddess" is one of the most enjoyable of all the Arliss films. It was based on a play written for him, and that he also made as a silent movie in 1923. (It was also remade as a standard wartime action "B" with Paul Cavanagh in the Arliss role, under the title "Adventure in Iraq"). Next to "Old English", it was his most successful role. It has the advantage of being both good, if theatrical melodrama, which can be taken - none too certainly - as a tongue-in-cheek romp. It's that uncertainty which adds the flavor, and the suspense. Certainly Arliss revels in every theatrical flourish and blockbuster line, pausing at key moments for a self-congratulatory stance which suggests that all is going supremely well by his standards. For a 1929 talkie it is - despite obvious acts, entrances and exits - a far from static film. It's good theatre to begin with. Secondly, it is quite well cut and paced. Thirdly, it's an elaborate film, which gets out of doors (a little) into Chatsworth locations, and also makes effective use of spectacular sets still standing from Michael Curtiz' "The Cat's Eyes". There is also a certain amount of stock footage from the silent version, its presence given away by the different camera speeds, yet its matching-up problems eased by the fact that Arliss, Alice Joyce and Ivan Simpson played the same roles in the earlier film. Some of the dialogue is a theatrical joy, and not all the best lines go to Arliss (though few get away from that eagle eye!) H.B. Warner has some rather fruity lines too, perhaps the best being the stiff and resigned "Well, at least we didn't take it lying down!" after having cold-bloodedly murdered the Rajah's manservant, a move motivated 90% as a gesture of defiance, and only 10% in the interests of self-preservation.

There are some slight signs of negative deterioration in spots, and the sound quality is a little harsh. But these are small prices to pay for such a delightful and enjoyable excursion into wholehearted theatrical melodrama -- and the classic closing line from Arliss is worth the price of admission itself!

William K. Everson
Program ends: 10.05