French Intrigues: Two Periods

SECRETSES OF THE FRENCH POLICE (BKo Radio, 1932) Directed by Edward Sutherland Executive Producer, David O. Selznick; Screenplay by Samuel Ornitz and Robert Trasker from original stories by H. Ashton Wolfe; Camera, Al Gilks; Music, Max Steiner; 60 mins.


For some reason, "Secrets of the French Police" has become tantamount to a "lost" film — although to my knowledge there is no legal or physical reason for it. TV stations, buying rights to a very old reel in the early 1950s, were not sure what they had and when (and if) they query it, are just told that it isn't available. Adding to its allure is the fact that many who saw it in 1932 have the fondest memories of it, probably because of its wild serial-like melodramatic situations. However, like the serials themselves, it doesn't really live up to those memories: it's fun, and one can readily see why the initial impact was so strong, but a second viewing is in a sense an exercise and it can be struck off, without too much sadness, from the list of fondest early 30s' movie experiences; in this loose meta-narrative, it certainly gains academically. It is a quite remarkable series of rip-offs, attempts to cash in on elements from the recently popular "Arsene Lupin" and "Mata Hari," and to steal a march on the upcoming "Mystery of the Wax Museum." The apparent plagiarism from the latter (including script elements ultimately deleted from that Warner film) is both curious and fascinating, and is well outlined, along with an excellent survey of the film's history, in the "Mystery of the Wax Museum" entry in the University of California's published Warner script. This one researched and written by Richard Koszarski, is very much to be recommended. Despite its opening leavings to semi-documentary authenticity, "Secrets of the French Police" is pretty wild and silly — but is too short, and moves too fast, for there to be time to question it. Its cast is quite interesting, with Gwili Andre (the first of not-too-many Dietrich imitators) making almost as brief a bid for stardom as did Weldon Heyburn with his Gable imitation last week. Strangest element of all is the film's switch to the horror genre in its two-thirds of its kind, it has the added interest of being one of the last films of James Whale, whose career has taken on a new perspective now that his films can — finally — be studied as a total body of work.

The beating that French history takes here at Hollywood's hands (even the wrong King Louis is involved) is nothing compared to the beating that French literature endures. Not only is Dumas' tale drastically reshaped (though without sacrificing its spirit) but Anthony Hope's serial of pub-focused villains is as well. The Prisoner of Zenda, in its climax, swashbuckling is all but pushed aside and the whole affair turned into a Western. Nevertheless, it is a rousing adventure and an object lesson in how a good director can make a cheap production look like an epic. Writers have sometimes criticized this film as an example of the "fabulous" scope on which movies used to be made, although admittedly such observations were probably made via television exposure, and TV of course tends to cover up all of the corner-cutting. Back projection is obviously used, though often quite convincingly, and some of the sets look as small and empty as they were in the film. Some of the most effective scenes are played out in quite cramped sets but in semidarkness and with dramatic lighting. Too, Whale is ingenious in using Joan Bennett, often balancing her great beauty with but a single prop, so that the composition is pleasing and the audience has no inclination to examine the somewhat threadbare decor. There are only three genuinely "big" scenes in the entire picture: two, at the beginning, are establishing stock shots from Fairbanks' 1929 version; the other (the climactic marriage ceremony) is done via a faked glass shot. And all power to it for looking so impressive on a typically economical Edward Small budget.
Louis Hayward apart (effective as the weakling, but always somewhat lacking when called apart to exhibit star magnetism in swashbucklers) the cast pulls it weight magnificently, and is another example of budget-stretching, using experienced and reliable names, but not unduly expensive ones! Joseph Schildkraut delivers his lines with far more aplomb than they really deserve, Warren William is a fine D'Artagnan with an enjoyably Barrymoresque half-wit masquerade, and Joan Bennett is, as always in this period, both elegant and quite incredibly bumbling. The casting of such a typical Broadway showgirl type as Marian Martin as the King's mistress — but on the other hand, had this been a Sam Katzman production, it might well have been Iris Adrian!

But it's really James Whale's show. Admittedly, his great period was behind him, and the film/theatre innovations that reached their peak in his 1934 "One More River" are hardly spectacularly in evidence. But he seems to be happy with the project, after the harassment of his last years at Universal, and it's a pleasure to see his signature peeking through every so often. The torture chamber scenes have a nice Gothic feel to them, and the camera movements, the pantomimic gestures and the compositions in the first scenes of the masked prisoner, isolated in his cell, bring similar images to mind from "The Invisible Man". It's good to see Dwight Frye on hand again, and it's an accidental but interesting footnote to film history that, at opposite ends of their careers, the paths of Frankenstein specialists James Whale and Peter Cushing crossed briefly in this film (and in Whale's subsequent "They Dare Not Love").

Edward Small's productions were always economical, but on the other hand he had a knack of seeing to it that every dollar spent showed up on the screen. In many ways his best productions were those film noir thrillers of the late 40's, "Raw Deal" and "T-Men", where John Alton's stunning camerawork created its own mood and its own world, entirely transcending budgetary considerations. But in terms of scale — or the cunning illusion of scale — "The Man In The Iron Mask" is quite certainly the biggest Small production, and certainly one of the most entertaining. One wonders why Whale didn't do the follow-up, "The Son of Monte Cristo", which wasn't nearly as good. Ironically, it was directed by Rowland V. Lee, who had stepped into Whale's shoes before — doing such late 30's Universal specials as "The Sun Never Sets", "Tower of London" and "Son of Frankenstein" which would surely have gone to Whale if he had not been out of favor with the studio at that stage in his career.

William K. Everson

Program ends: 10.50 (Due to late finish, no discussion period this evening)

Note: as these notes are written, I do not know what the school's policy will be in the event of a transit strike. Luckily, even if the strike comes off, there is the Easter week break which gives time either for the strike to be settled, or for us to find ways of adjusting to a new and more chaotic way of life.

If for any reason the School should curtail its evening classes because of the strike, any of the affected programs will be re-scheduled just as soon as things get back to normal. I don't anticipate that classes will be cancelled; but luckily all of the films scheduled for the remaining sessions can be held over indefinitely and until re-scheduled.