The key interest in this film is, of course, its raison d'être, which is the substantial condemnation of the Biblical book to deMille's silent "The Ten Commandments". It's impressive if hardly overwhelming footage, though the orgies look like such harmless fun that Moses does emerge as something of a spoil-sport, which he probably was though doubtless well-intentioned. The parting of the Red Sea though is still an interesting effect, more convincing than the complicated optical-house reconstruction in the sound remake. Retention of the original subtitles, rewarding as they are to film students, does rather destroy the illusion that this is a Biblical tale being narrated by a priest. It's as if God pulled out a 16mm projector, and the combination of titles and narratives doesn't really work - although one can hardly quibble at that, since its utilization in the first place was dictated by economy and novelty rather than art. For the rest, within its own boundaries, it holds up rather well, especially for a film directed by a basic hack like Louis Gasnier, maker of some of the earlier "Petticoats of Pauline" episodes, and far more implicitly called in later years to direct cheap pictures using a lot of stock footage. But it's superbly photographed by Karl Strauss, is well paced, has interesting sets, and hardly dates at all, except perhaps intellectually. It's one of an anti-sensationally prolific cycle of films that started around 1920 with the ten-year anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and continued well into the 30's, dealing in often very melodramatic terms with the Revolution and its aftermath. (Examples: "The Red Danube", "The Tempest", "The Yellow Ticket", "Rasputin and the Empress"). As an indictment of Bolshevism, as it was understood (or misunderstood) by Hollywood, it is naive, though well meaning, and some of the dialogue is a joy. (Sample: "Your four occupations are ? " "Gumshoeing" ! ) Communism seems to have been a convenient peg on which to hang both an exotic film and the deMille footage. But at that it is less well, and thoroughly contains more basic truths, than the hysterical anti-Red films of the late 40's and '50's - "I Married A Communist", "The Red Menace", etc. Although the nominal villain, No.1 communist Irving Pichel ultimately turns out to have both integrity and likeable qualities, the script rather surprisingly puts all the goodness on the side of the State, leaving democracy to the Church and the dimwits. Marguerite Churchill, representing all the solid "old" virtues of faith and love, is quite overshadowed by Miss Marita in that Red underwear.

- 10 minute Intermission -

THE FIREBIRD (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by William Dieterle; Screenplay by Charles Kenyon from a play by Lajos Eille and Jeffrey Dell; Camera, Ernest Haller; Art Direction, Anton Groth; 74 mins.

With Verne Teasdale, Lionel Atwill, Ricardo Cortez, C. Aubrey Smith, Anita Louise, Dorothy Tree, Helen Twelvetrees, Hobart Cavanaugh, Robert Barrat, Hal K. Dawson, Russell Hicks, Spencer Charters, Etienne Girardot, Nan Grey, Florence Fair, Jane Darwell, Frank Barlen, Tom Wilson, Earle Apfel, Bert Rose, Bill Elliott, Gordon de Main, Milt Kibbee, Leo White, Perry Iris, Paul Panzer.

I must confess that "The Firebird" isn't as good a film as I'd recalled from my last viewing (some 15 years ago), but this may be partially because since then this period of the 30's has come to be regarded as director Dieterle's most interesting, and indeed, two of his other films from 1934 are among his best of any period - "Madame Du Barry" and "Fire over Florence. " But his trademarks are well in evidence - a mobile camera, fast-cutting, sweeping overhead shots - but the film does not call for such devices, and will thus find this its greatest extent, and Dieterle uses them only when they seem the most of the moment. Thus, despite its European settings and pretensions to being something more, it is really just Phil Vance in disguises - with the emphasis more on the machinations of the suspects than on the sluthood (C. Aubrey Smith). The NY Times objected that the identity of the killer was withheld far too long, but they just didn't know their movies - both the murder victim and the killer are fairly apparent long before the crime takes place, and it's the "why" rather than the "who" that holds our interest. The plot, of course, a marvellous cast of old reliables, with Lionel Atwill stealing the opportunity to play his scenes. The use of the Stravinsky music of the title and the colorful sets add an interesting historical touch, since it was so regarded, and Anton Groth's stylish art direction also makes good use - once again - of the iron staircase and alley that we all know and love from "H22 Street". The print is a little on the dark side, and the film itself is solidly satisfying rather than memorable and admittedly a bit talkative; but it seems never to be shown these days, and any Dieterle with this cast and Anita Louise leading particularly lovely, needs no excuse to warrant at least this one revival.

-- William K. Everson

Program ends app. 10:30; discussion session follows.