THE SILENT COMMAND (Fox, 1923) Directed by J. Gordon Edwards; Scenario by Anthony Paul Kelly, from a story by Rufus King; Camera, George Lane. 80 mins. **


(* Note: for release the film was cut by some seven minutes, possibly to its advantage. Our print tonight however is of the full pre-release version."

J. Gordon Edwards is one of the pioneer directors least adequately represented archivally today. He was active from 1914 on, turning out some 20 of the best known Theda Bara vehicles, a dozen William Farnum films, and scores of very successful and highly profitable comedies with Herbert Brenon on the Annette Kellerman films, filmed extensively on location (Italy, Egypt, etc.) and directed movies as diverse as "The Queen of Sheba" and adaptations of Tolstoy and Wilkie Collins! Yet only two of his (later) films are known still to exist: the Farnum western "Drag Harlan," and tonight's film, his last but one, made in the early 20's when his earlier prolific output of about ten films a year was down to a mere one a year. Obviously his record in the past was too impressive for it to be fair to judge his abilities on this enjoyable but routine picture; Benjamin Cristensen's "The Mysterious X" of a decade earlier had a very similar plot, but is still fresh and innovative. "The Silent Command" has one of the perennial espionage plots - virtually the same one used for the Robert Taylor "This is my Affair" in the mid-30's - but its technique, uncomplicated and frank, is a far cry from its scathing superiority today. It is also quite pedestrian in its movement, coming to life only for its exciting and admittedly prolonged climax. And coming from the man who guided Theda Bara through her biggest hits, its vamp scenes seem somewhat tame too. Yet there are compensating factors, most spectacularly of course the pleasure of watching Bela Lugosi as the villain (neatly named Hisston!) with many of his gestures and mannerisms still firmly established - the flourishers, the self-satisfied puffing at cigars, even the use of his eyes (underlined by panel shots) in scenes of menace. Quite incidentally, Gordon McEdward, who plays Gridley, was director Edwards' son, was also an assistant director (for his father, and for John Ford, Frank Borzage and other Fox directors) and is the father of Blake Edwards. Until a few years ago, he was still busy and active in Hollywood, and I assume still is since I don't recall seeing an obituary. "The Silent Command" is an enjoyably light touch from early days, school, from a time when it still mattered whether or not the Panama Canal was blown up!

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

SILENT SPIES (SPIES) (UPA, 1928; US release in 1929 by MGM). Produced and Directed by Fritz Lang; Scenario, Thea von Harbou; Fritz Lang; Camera, Fritz Arno Wagner. 80 mins approx.

German film, English titles.

With Rudolph Klein Rogge (Hagghi); Willi Fritsch (Agent 326); Gerda Maurus (Sonia); Ippu Plock (Masimo); Fritz Rap (Ivan); Men Deyers (Kitty); Craigalagh Sherry (Burton Jason); Julius Falkenstein (Hotel manager); George John (train conductor). Paul Rechkof (Steloth); Paul Horbiger (Valet); Louis Ralph (Hans); and Hermann Vonam, Max Berger, Hermann Wathier.

Lang's prize film "Metropolis" had been expensive (and would take so much time to recover its costs that Lang had to follow up immediately with a film that was economical, commercially sure-fire, and could re-establish Lang's reputation as a combination of artist and boxoffice draw. "Spies" was the result, produced independently by Lang for his own company, and virtually an extension of his earlier "Dr. Mabuse." Many of his stock characters and situations reappear, polished and honed to perfection. If it's less nightmarish and expressionistic than most Lang, it's also, relatively speaking, more realistic (it was initially based on a very specific Soviet spy ring scandal in London, although fiction tended to take over as writing and production progressed) and is quite uncharacteristically light-hearted for Lang, the closest he ever came to the spirit of Hitchcock, and this due no little to the engaging personality of his hero Willi Fritsch, who was also closer in spirit to the Donat/Grant heroes of Hitchcock than to the dour and doomed heroes of Lang. An infinitely more imaginative and polished production than "The Silent Command" (hard to realize that only about 4 years separates them), it is also the first of the deliberately gimmicky spy films, and thus a direct ancestor of the Bond movies. There are typically nightmarish Lang elements, and a sequence that influenced as recent a film as Ken Russell's Valentino epic, but basically it's a serial-like entertainment. The version we are seeing tonight is the American (slightly reconstructed version does exist - but even initially, it was much shorter than the average Lang film). It would be played in a 2-hour slot (as proven by existing ads from German papers of the period) and thus garner as many showings per day as possible. The excised scenes are all good, but unlike the major deletions made in other Lang films (and especially his two-parters) their loss does not materially affect the film.

Program ends approx. 10:30.

--- William K. Everson