LES CHOIX DE BOIS (WOODEN CROSSSES) France, 1931; a Pathé-Nathan Production Directed by Raymond Bernard; screenplay by Bernard and Andre Lang from the novel by Roland Dorgeles; Camera, Jules Kruger; 100 mins.
With Pierre Blanchar (Gilbert Demachy); Charles Vaneau (Breval), Aimos (Pouillard); Antonin Artaud (Coryd), Raymond Corby (Patron), Marcel Delaitre (Sevry), Francois Balit and Gaston Modot, Paul Axais, Rene Bergeron, Pierre Labry, Georges Laby, J.F. Martial, Rene Montis, Marc Vailb, Gabriel Gabrio, Jean Galland. Untitled (no U.S. release); see synopsis below.

SYNOPSIS
Frankly this is a virtually impossible film to synopsize succinctly. Sound recording is not of the best, and there are many regional accents involved. However, the dialogue is probably the least important aspect since for the most part it is a dialogue more authentic than any silent film dialogues, "All Quiet on the Western Front" and other war films from literary sources: the troops grumbling among themselves, recalling their civilian life, their wives, children and girl-friends. Most of the film is very visual, and the battle and other action scenes sustained to extreme length. Transposing (mentally) the dialogue from films of the "All Quiet on the Western Front" calibre will certainly help, and the basic continuity is explained below.

With the outbreak of World War One, Demachy, a student, Breval, a baker, and others from all walks of civilian life, are caught up in the patriotic fervour of the moment, and enlist almost happily - to be quickly disillusioned by the mud, the hunger, and the fear of death that confront them almost instantly. The first real test of their endurance comes when they hear German sappers digging their way into their trench, "sawn-off" rifles and revolvers in hand. The men panic, their commanding officer reassures them that as long as they can still hear the digging, they have nothing to worry about. But periodic pauses in the digging add to their tension. They eventually move out to new positions, and their trenches blow up minutes after they leave.

After their first real exposure to fire, Demachy prays in the church: "We accept everything; that we can't sleep, that we have no bread, only please let us live, just let us live!"

A huge bombardment which goes on for ten days without cease further reduces the ranks. Finally it is over, and the men look forward to relaxing, and then some leave. But the action is considered a victory, and the big brass want a victory parade, so the exhausted men are forced to march and sing. Then, before they have a chance to regain their strength, leave is cancelled and they move out again. Demachy's closest friend, Breval, is mortally wounded and dies wondering what will become of his child. Finally Demachy is badly wounded on the battlefield. His weak cries fail to attract the attention of the medics picking up the wounded, and he dies.

With the coming of sound, a number of war films - usually derived from novels or plays - with passionately anti-war attitudes were made by the major film producers. One of the first was "Westfront 1918"; Britain did "Journey's End" (though filmed in Hollywood); America's "All Quiet on the Western Front" certainly achieved the greatest commercial and critical success, but France's "Wooden Crosses" was certainly the most powerful - not to say the most emotionally draining - of them all. Given its World Premiere for the League of Nations in Geneva, it garnered rave reviews when it opened in Paris shortly afterwards. Fox, impressed, bought it intending to release it in the U.S. Then, probably reasoning that its exposure would be limited due to the then-small art house market, they decided instead to remake it, using most of the big scenes and action footage. William Faulkner was signed to work on the new script, which went through about half a dozen different versions. The initial one was very close to the French original, but then changes crept in, most of them occasioned by the need to cater to star images and to add showmanship. The French film concentrates on the enlisted men; the final American version (which became something of a forerunner of such WW2 films as "Twelve O'Clock High") concerned itself more with the officers, and the responsibilities of command. Subplots were worked in, including one involving Lionel Barrymore (who as the son of Warner Baxter and a man too old to fight, shows cowardice in action, and then redeems himself) and of course a romantic element with the two leading officers (Baxter and Fredric March) vying for the favors of pretty nurse June Lang. The almost thrown-away incident (in the original) of the mined trenches is expanded so that it becomes a running suspense motif throughout the entire film. Actually, "The Road to Glory" (directed by Howard Hawks in 1936) is a rather good film on its own, but of course its production completely suppressed the French original, which was never shown here at all and is virtually an unknown film. It has to go back to Paris later this month, but hopefully some distributors who have been invited to tonight's screening may be excited and/or interested enough to try to negotiate for distribution.

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rights here. Clearly it is too grim a film to hope to be a notable commercial success, but it would need only sparse subtitling, and certainly deserves to be available).

Fox first used some of the battle footage in the 1934 John Ford film "The World Moves On". Later on, when the Hawks film used it again (and "The Road to Glory" makes NO reference in its credits to the French original) Hawks' autheurist devotees claimed that he deliberately used the "Ford footage" as an homage to Ford! "The Road to Glory" is actually a triumph of both art direction and photographic (Gregg Toland) design since it matches exactly the look of the original, and facilitates incorporation not only of the big battle scenes, introduced on the first set, studio closeups, but also of establishing scenes, superimpositions. and just about everything that could be seen: itDespite the new plot-line. After "Wooden Crosses" finishes (and with all due regard to the fatigue and shell-shock you'll all be experiencing) I'll be running about a reel (ten minutes or so) from "The Road to Glory" to illustrate this duplication of style and the skill of intercutting. Look closely and you'll even see Pierre Blanchar having a few grenades in the American version - and the church sequence is most adroitly reused, even with some of the same sound track, but with June Lang replacing Blanchar and speaking his prayer for him.

Raymond Bernard is surely one of the least known major French directors, and one most in need of reappraisal. We ran his tremendous silent spectacle "The Miserables" on the Waddington Wall a few years back, and his long and definitive sound version of "Les Miserables" was included in the Museum of Modern Art's French cycle recently. Only about seven of his films (the size of his films made him a non-prolific director) have been released in this country, the last the pleasant but very atypical "The Fruits of Summer" in 1956. The film generally considered to be his masterpiece - "The Chess Player" - was a late silent released in this country in 1930, well after the talkie changeover, so that it was almost immediately dismissed and forgotten. Printing elements do exist to restore this film, but thus far there seems very little interest in Bernard in France. He died just a few years ago.

If Bernard had a directorial fault, it was (a) a seriousness of purpose which virtually expelled any hint of humor from his films, and (b) a tendency towards overstatement. The Griffith-like interweaving of different storylines and multiple, clashes, the climax of "The Miracle of the Wolves" - though breathlessly exciting and spectacular, just went on too long - as though Bernard was unable to stop the momentum he had started.

In "Wooden Crosses" however, this concentration and a Hitchcockian manipulation of audience emotions helps the film enormously, even though perhaps making it tough to sit through. In the ten-day siege sequence, he literally never lets up in the ferocity of action, bombarding the audience as well as protagonists, constantly reminding us that this is going on for ten days. There comes a time when the audience has had more than enough, and what's more a show which director would have called a halt. But obviously war doesn't pause when one has had enough. In fact, going until the audience is so exhausted that it - like the soldiers - needs a respite. Then, when that respite is denied - first by the absurd victory parade and then by the canceling of leave and the moving on to new positions - the audience is likewise as frustrated and indignant as the soldiers. This also tends to dehumanize most of the soldiers; one doesn't feel individual pity for them, as one does in films like "Journey's End" or "All Quiet", but is merely enraged at the total waste of human life in general. No film has ever been a totally successful anti-war statement, but I suspect that this film (with, in a totally different way, Renoir's "La Grande Illusion") comes closest.

Although tonight's program is a short one, it seemed pointless to add shorts - even semi-related ones - and thus dilute the effect of Bernard's film. There will however, be ample time for discussion. Also there is far more that can and should be said about this film (and Bernard) than there is room for in these two pages of notes. Anyone interested in reading further might like to read my article on this film in the current (March) issue of "Films in Review", designed to coincide with this showing. If copies are available by Friday, I will attach it to the wall at the rear of the auditorium for perusal during or after the screening.

-- William K. Everson

Program Ends approx. 9:40., followed by discussion.

A confirmation: MYSTERY OF MR X is on hand - and it's a beauty - so there will be no changes in next week's program.

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