ARCHIVE NIGHT

A program of early sound Oriental Melodrama and Comedy

DAUGHTER OF THE DRAGON (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Lloyd Corrigan; screenplay by Corrigan, Monte Katterjohn and Sidney Buchman from "Daughter of Fu Manchu" by Sax Rohmer; Camera, Victor Milner; 70 mins.

With Warner Oland (Fu Manchu); Anna May Wong (Ling Moy); Sessue Hayakawa (Ah Kee); Bramwell Fletcher (Ronald Petrie); Frances Dade (Joan Marshall); Holmes Herbert (Sir John Petrie); Neila Walker (Lady Petrie); Nicholas Soussannin (Morlof); Lawrence Grant (Sir Basil); Harold Minjir (Rogers); E-Alyn Warren (Lu Chow); Harrington Reynolds (Hobbs); Tetsu Komai (Lao); Oie Chan (The Amah); Olaf Hytten (Butler).

Only by an odd fluke is this film available. When tv time rolled around Paramount's rights on the three Fu Manchu stories they had made (1929-31) had long since expired, but Fu's name not being in the title, someone slipped up and allowed a few prints of this one to be made up - and shown. The two earlier ones ("The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu" and "The Return of Fu Manchu") were quite certainly better, with a superior director, Rowland V. Lee (on both), and a better sense of continuity between the two films, strengthened by the continuing characters played by O.P. Heggie (as Nayland Smith) and Neil Hamilton (Petrie) and Jean Arthur as his romantic interest. Oland played Fu in all three of course, as well as in a parody sequence in "Paramount on Parade".

#3 is clearly designed to make a fast buck since the Fu Manchu name still means something, but also to finish off the series once and for all (despite Mordaunt Scott's tearful warning with "The Mask of Fu Manchu"). Nayland Smith is dispensed with entirely, which is a pity, while Mordaunt Scott on the other hand the film certainly isn't a cheater, either entertainment-wise or in terms of budget, as so many final entries in series so often were. The only thing really wrong with it is the director, Lloyd Corrigan (who scripted the previous two and co-scripted this one) who had no sense of style, and a fondness for an element of comedy at all times. Undoubtedly the time-consuming and unfunny character played by Harold Minjir (if he had dared to show up in one of the books, Fu would have fed him into The Seven Gates to Paradise without a moment's hesitation) is a comic invention of Corrigan's, somewhat paralleling Claude Allister's Algy in the Bulldog Drummond films.

It's odd that with so many rich Oriental melodramas gracing the screen in the 20's, Hollywood had never made any silent Fu Manchu films ... but they were left to the British in a loose-running series of FRIDAYS in which very closely on the Rohmer stories. ("The Coughing Horror" was especially good). But despite being the least of the Paramount trio, "Daughter of the Dragon" has many good things going for it, most of all Warner Oland of course. One often hears his role here dismissed, as though he's disposed of immediately, but actually Oland is around for approximately half the picture. Though fatally wounded in the first reel, he's a long time a-dying, and his wound repairs neither his menace, his eloquence, nor the breath he needs to deliver his colorful lines. The sets of damask drapery and solid rooms are solidly, but not very colorfully, and there is a plentiful supply of welding panels, through-stillets, dacoits, ringing gongs, thunder-flashes and diabolic tortures. Although some of it is a bit stiff and stilted, it is really no more dated than most other Paramount thrillers ("Murder By The Clock" for example) of the same period, and its fairly snappy running time plus its visual appeal and the Oland-Wong combination unite to keep it all very entertaining.

One must say a kindly word for poor Sessue Hayakawa however. Not only does one have the situation of a Japanese actor playing a Chinese character (not done in the best of Oriental thesic circles) but also, for his first talking role, it saddles him with dialogue that seems sadiatically contrived to throw him. His delivery of a near-climactic line about "the triumph of irony..." could only have been rivalled by Kay Francis, who couldn't pronounce her "r's at all.

Incidentally, over the traditional main titles of a fiery dragon there's a rather charming, folkay prologue which, serial-like, covers Fu's depredations in the previous two films, and begins "As everyone knows, twenty years ago Fu Manchu terrorised London". From that beginning, how could one help but enjoy it?

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

WELCOME DANGER (Harold Lloyd Corporation-Paramount, 1929) Directed by Mal St. Clair (silent version) and Clyde Bruckman (sound, release version); Asst. Director, Gaylord Lloyd; Story by Felix Adler, Clyde Bruckman, Lex Neal, with dialogue by Paul Gerard Smith; Camera, Walter Lundin and Henry Kohler; Musical Direction, C. Bakaleinikoff; 115 mins.

With Harold Lloyd (Harold Breeze); Barbara Kent (Billie Lee); Noah Young (Officer Glancy); Charles Middleton (John Thomas/ The Dragon); William Wallace (Capt.Walton); James Wang (Doctor Gow); Douglas Haig (Buddy Lee); Nelson McDowell (Train passenger); E.H. Calvert (Chief Breeze); Edgar Kennedy (Sergeant); James Mason (Dick the Dude); Eddy Chandler (cop); Tetsu Komai, James Leong (Henchmen); Leo Willis (cop); Wang Lee (Chinaman); Soo Hoo Sun (Chinese corpse)
"Welcome Danger" is, in a sense, the "Greed" of the comedy world. Lloyd completed it as a full silent, remade it as a talkie, previewed it at a three-hour length, and finally released it just a few minutes under the two hour mark. While it is (today) one of his weaker works, and of primarily academic interest, at the time it was both a big critical and popular success, and financially it was Lloyd's biggest hit ever. Although that may be a little hard to understand today, the reasons are actually perfectly valid. First, Lloyd was at his peak and audiences wanted to see and hear him in a talkie. Secondly, despite its awkward and occasionally crude production values, they were still well above average for the day, and the film looked slicker than most 1929 films. Thirdly it went into release before depression gripped America, and it was the Lloyd character's failure to acknowledge or come to grips with the problems of the depression that worked against so many of his subsequent films. It might, actually, have been better for Lloyd had "Welcome Danger" been a disappointment or even a partial failure; as it was, convinced he had made a wholly successful changeover to talkies, he saw no need to change his style and (apart from cutting the running time) his follow-up films stayed in the same mould, and made the same mistakes.

Lloyd's screen-character was of the 20's, a go-getter as he himself was. Since the depression didn't affect him, it didn't affect the screen Harold either, and his constant striving for success at any price, ignoring the realities of the depression, drained much of the charm from his screen image and alienated audiences, despite the merits of many of his talkies. One sees the beginning of this decline in "Welcome Danger".

Perhaps Lloyd never fully understood that character, and sound was not kind to it. What had seemed merely brash in the silents, came through as conceited and bombastic in sound. Lloyd, in sound films, talked too much and with too much emphasis, and as his own producer, had no one to tell him to tone himself down. (Howard Hughes recognised this weakness; the many cuts he made in "The Sin of Harold Diddlebokk" before releasing it as "Mad Wednesday" were mainly of Lloyd's speeches). Too, while pacing was a problem to many silent comedians transferring to sound, even if it were a boy, his bad temper would be hard to justify and the audience, already impatient for the plot proper to get under way, is not so much rooting for Lloyd as waiting for him to have the wind taken out of his sails when the deception is revealed. (Incidentally, the expected comeuppance doesn't materialise). Once the plot proper - a Chinese underworld melodrama - does get under way, Lloyd comes up against another problem. Even more so than most silent comedies, his were filled with violence and even sadism (viz "The Kid Brother") but denied the reality of sound, it remained pantomimed violence in which laughter dominated over pain. In "Welcome Danger", this balance is upset, and it is as if Lloyd projected the looks of corpses, created a sense of Islamic austerity at times, and youngsters - not as hardy as inured to TV violence as today's breed - must have gotten quite a jolt at these scenes.

In fairness, I must admit that I have not (yet) seen this film with a really large audience. Lloyd knew his audiences even if he didn't fully know his own screen character, and "Welcome Danger" may well play better than I have suggested. Whether it does or not, it's certainly a rare opportunity to see what is certainly a landmark film in Lloyd's career. Because of its length, its dated quality (and probably racial undertones too), the owners of the Lloyd films have no intention of doing anything with this film. I am particularly indebted to Adam Reilly, who obtained the print from the Lloyd estate, for loaning it for this screening. As the author of the book "Harold Lloyd: A Biography" (MacMillan), a very capable and complete work, and one of the best extant both on Lloyd and silent comedy, highly recommended for anyone interested in the comedic aspects of film history.

--- William K. Everson ---

--- A F.B. on DAUGHTER OF THE DRAGON: director Corrigan is better known as a dull and rather intrusive character/comedian of the 50's and 40's, although it was hardly his fault that he was always type-cast in obnoxious roles. ---