FAHRMANN MARIA (*"FERRYMANN MARIA") (*Terra Film/Pallas Film, Germany, 1935; released 1936) Written and Directed by Frank Wysbar; Camera, Frank Weinmahr; Music, Herbert Windt; 75 mins.

With Sybille Schmitz (Maria); Aribert Mog (The soldier); Peter Voss (Death); Carl de Vogt (The Fiddler); Karl Plaaten (The Old Furryman)

STRANGLER OF THE SWAMP (Producers Releasing Corporation, 1945) Written and Directed by Frank Wysbar; Additional Scripting, Leo McCarthy; Additional Dialogue and Dialogue Direction, Harold Erickson; Camera, James S. Brown; Art Direction, Edward C. Jewell; Music, Alexander Steinert; Associate Producer, Raoul Pagel; 60 mins.

With: Rosemary LaPlanche (Maria); Charles Middleton (The ghost of Douglas); Robert Barlow (Christian Saunders); Blake Edwards (Chris); Nolan Leary (Jeff); Effie Parnell (Mrs. Saunders) and Frank Conian, Theresa Lyon, Virginia Farmer (villagers)

Frank Wysbar (1939-1967) is one of the least known and one of the most interesting of the German directors of the sound period. He made two of the finest German talkies - "Anna and Elizabeth" (1935) and tonight's film, "Fahrmann Maria" - and eventually fled from Hitler's Germany to America in 1939. Not too much is known about his early years in this country, other than that he did a substantial amount of lecturing with an anti-Nazi stance. His Hollywood career was limited to four interesting quickies for PRC, and the curious "The Prairie", an entirely studio-made western. He returned to German production in 1957, making some eight films (one of which we'll show in the autumn) but never regaining his former stature. But on the strength of "Anna and Elizabeth" he certainly put himself in position to be taken as one of the screen's most individual poets, and the word is not used lightly.

In the Bulletin copy I referred to "Fahrmann Maria" as "perhaps the only genuine film masterpiece to be made under the Nazi regime". It's a strong generalisation and of course I was influenced by the superficially autobiographical nature of the statement. In fact, the film is a superb film, but it is at least partly superb because it works so well at what it was designed for, as propaganda. With "Fahrmann Maria" one has to make no such restrictions: it is a great film by any standards, needing neither explanation nor apology.

"Fahrmann Maria" is the last of the great German films of fantasy and legend, that date back to "The Lost Shadow" and "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari", and it has echoes of many of the best German silents, most especially Lang's "Destiny" from which its Death figure is clearly drawn. Although there are periods of dialogue (none of it very important to the plot) it is essentially a silent film that tells its tale visually, and the super Wagenerian score helping to guide audience emotions. Made almost entirely on location in Hamburg near the Rotheraastein, the whole film breathes a sense of both the outdoors and of isolation. It may well be that even the very few interiors are locations too, a suspicion underlined by the curious scene where Maria goes inside a building to enquire about a job, and the camera remains outside to pick up the narration via overheard dialogue only, indicating that the building was for some reason not suitable for camerawork. (If the other few interiors are studio-filled, then they are beautifully matched up.) Although little seen even in Germany, the film was of considerable influence on later film-makers, not least Jean Cocteau and "Orpheus" and William Dieterle and "The Devil and Daniel Webster". Despite being a borderline horror/fantasy, it remains romantic in mood, with Death finally being defeated by faith and goodness, superbly represented by one of Sybille Schmitz' finest performances. (This actress, like Wysbar, is not nearly as well known as she deserves to be, though this film and Dreyer's "Vampyr" alone should have done the trick.) Unlike the remake, of which more in a moment, this is deliberately vague on details and atmosphere, and in a logical terms Death is presented as stern and unrelenting, but not without a certain humanity. Yet Death is defeated, which is hardly possible. (Evil can be defeated, and of course was time and time again in such films as "Nosferatu", but Death should not be vulnerable.)

The few plot details necessary to follow "Fahrmann Maria" will be covered after the notes for "Strangler of the Swamp", when comparisons can be made. When Wysbar finally got into Hollywood production in 1945, it was not too surprising that he should choose to remake his most successful German film. After all, it was essentially his property, it was not known to American audiences, and in a period distinguished by "The Uninvited" and "Dead of Night", ghost stories were finally being taken seriously. But PRC was about the cheapest of all the Hollywood studios, far lower down the economical scale than even Monogram, and what PRC expected was a shlock horror film (to accompany such product as "The Mad Monster" and "Dead Men Walk") made in about a week for $20,000 or less.

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Wysbar didn't disappoint them in terms of budget or shooting schedule, but what PRO got otherwise was the nearest they had ever had to an Art picture, a picture that couldn't hope to equal the lyricism of the original, but was still (some of the acting apart!) uncompromisingly romantic and Germanic. Its achievements are hard to explain to an audience that is happily unfamiliar with such typically unviewable PRO films as "Duke of the Navy" or "Today I Hang". But on a sound stage considerably smaller than the auditorium in which you are seeing the film, Wysbar and his ingenious art director created a convincing swamp, using sound lenses, paintings overhung with a vine or two, artificial gullies to conform to some of the unique lay of the set, to evoke a real atmosphere of both space and isolation. Camerawork is cunningly designed too, master long shots being inter-cut with close-ups and then back again so that the short distance that the ferry covers actually seems much longer.

Obviously "Strangler of the Swamp" is no masterpiece — but it is a masterpiece of classy shoestring budget shooting. Even in 1945, $20,000 was at poverty level — today it wouldn't buy you more than a few closeups! Shooting a 60 minute film in a week obviously leaves little time for subtlety either in preparation or execution, and it is these subtleties that let the film down a little. Although Charles Middleton's ghost is no stock bogey-man, clearly his supernatural presence should be feared. But he talks a little too much, and a ghost that can be conversed with and reasoned with is less frightening. Too, PRO, probably appalled at what Wysbar had given them, sought to salvage it as a horror film by afflicting it with a typical schlock horror musical score — which not only telegraphs surprises, but also — more importantly — does away with those elements of silence (where characters are striving to hear whatever it is that's out there) so important to the mood of the good horror film. But it's such a remarkable little film that one can be tolerant of these shortcomings, and of Rosemary LaPlance, a beauty contest winner on the threshold of a negligible career, and leading man Blake Edwards, who would later do better as a director.

We are showing the two films in reverse order for two obvious reasons. One, good as it is, especially considering the limitations under which it was made, "Strangler" would inevitably suffer if shown after its inspiration. More practically, since the plot is virtually the same (though less mystical) it will help in following the untitled "Maria" to have seen the English-language film first.

Comparisons are rather fascinating. The original is entirely an outdoor film, creating a sense of fun despite the sunshine, meadows and trees, whereas the remake, apart from a couple of natural exteriors (shot at night so that they are hardly visible) is entirely a studio-made film, capitalising on its stylised claustrophobia. Given audience acceptance of a ghost, "Strangler" tries hard to be logical in detail. The ghost of an unjustly hanged man is acting out motives of revenge, and is not just an abstract figure of Death. Maria comes to the scene because she is the grand-daughter of the old ferryman; her ultimate lover is merely coming home from the city, and isn't chased there by Death's messengers.

In the original, the hero (a character vaguely parallel to David Niven in "A Matter of Life and Death") is a soldier who escaped death on the battlefield, and is being chased by Death and his messengers who wish to claim him; his only wish is to return to his native land, which is where he ultimately takes Maria; like the two partners in "Vagary" the couple run away, allows them to leave the land of phantoms behind them. Maria herself is a homeless wanderer who takes the position of ferryman despite the hardships involved, and not knowing that nobody quite believes the advertisement for the job which claims that the previous ferryman died of natural causes. The philosophic fiddler really has no place in the story except to act as a kind of chorus and reflect the moods of others. (He has no place in PRO's film, where he would have added another $200 to the budget!) Given these few facts, and the PRO film as a kind of road-map, you'll have no trouble following and appreciating "Fahrmann Maria".

Apart from a laudatory reference in David Hull's (American) book "Film in the Third Reich", "Fahrmann Maria" is virtually ignored critically. None of the post-war German appraisals of pre-war German film, not even Lotte Eisner's "The Haunted Bunker" makes any mention of it at all. Dr. Goebbels reputedly hated the film, but didn't give into his Nazi colleagues who saw it as anti-Nazi propaganda (with Death's Messengers looking like and paralleling the SS) and wanted it banned. He probably didn't want to make a cultural cause-célébre out of it, but may have had a lot to do with its meagre distribution.

STUTTGART (Germany, 1935) will open the program. An unknown, unlisted film by the celebrated Walter Ruttmann (who made "Berlin" in the 20's) it is a beautiful little one-reeler designed to bring tourists to Stuttgart. Whether tourists would be attracted by the graves of dead industrialists is doubtful, but if it isn't a great tourist attraction, it is certainly a lovely little city symphony in miniature.

--- William K. Everson

Program Ends: 10.15 approx. Discussion session follows.