Two off-beat and overlooked films from the 40's

JEALOUSY (Republic, 1945) Written, produced and directed by Gustav Machaty; co-written by Arnold Phillips from an original story by Dalton Trumbo; Camera: Henry Sharp; Musical Score, Hanns Eisler; Art Dir: Frank Sylos; 71 min. With: John Loder, Nils Asther, Jane Randolph, Karen Morley, Hago Haas, Holmes Herbert, Michael Mark, Mauritz Hugo, Peggy Leen, Mary Arden, "Kid" Chissell.

In a sense, "Jealousy" was Republic's first tentative foray into the "Art" field, predating "Spectre of the Rose", "Macbeth" and later prestige films by Borzage, Lang and Ford. In one way, it wasn't too much of a gamble: it is short, relatively economical, and could be sold as a straight thriller. On the other hand, Republic had always specialised in slick westerns, serials and action pictures, and that was what exhibitors expected. Notably lacking the typical Republic action, "Jealousy" garnered little support from Republic customers, and its exhibition life was relatively sparse.

In retrospect, "Jealousy" is particularly interesting as the only American feature of the Czech director Gustav Machaty, who in Europe, via such films as "Extase" and "Nocturne", had been a specialist in lush erotic romances. Coming to this country as a refugee at the height of Production Code restrictions, he found neither outlet nor demand for his particular talent, and had to content himself by transferring his baroque visual style to such shorts as the "Crime Does Not Pay" entry, "The Wrong Way Out". After years of waiting, "Jealousy" was his first chance at a feature - and wisely, he didn't go overboard, showing that he can work in on trend and on budget. Had it been bigger, his career might have taken off as did Douglas Sirk's, but the film gained so little attention (not even a NY first-run as a support, so it was ignored by the NY Times) that there was no chance of that. And when it hit tv later, its cast and crew were shown to contain so many "unfriendly" and possibly pro-Communist names among its lead personnel -- Dalton Trumbo's story, Hanns Eisler's music, Karen Morley -- plus all those dubious-sounding foreign names -- that the prints, of which tonight's print is one, were shorn of all their credits to avoid attracting unwanted (and unjustified) attention during the McCarthy era.

The film is certainly not political -- other than for hints of Dalton Trumbo's sour view of Hollywood, but on the other hand it doesn't have too many elements of traditional popular entertainment either. In its editing and photographic compositions it is both slow-paced and somewhat pretentious, and since the audience has a privileged view of what is going on, a view unshared by the characters in the film, the suspense values are not great either. But it is an absorbing and fascinating example of a highly stylised individual director trying to conform to Hollywood standards, without making too many compromises. Logic isn't always a strong point: the heroine, Jane Randolph, is as bland and uninteresting as she was in "Cat People", and one wonders why the hero (John Loder) prefers her to the more exciting if somewhat neurotic Karen Morley, who plays his nurse/assistant. Still, Loder is pretty bland and uninteresting himself. The death scene are not too convincing; even allowing for the time that ladies waste in department stores, one can't really believe that that time could be used to establish an alibi for a murder committed some way away. But one doesn't feel inclined to carp at such an interesting little picture, which must have been a real bonus to more serious moviegoers in the 40's, expecting a routine "B" time-killer and getting something far better. Incidentally, the script is particularly neat in planting two short phrases of dialogue which clearly indicate the Villainess's plan for suicide -- strictly a tabu in "plot solution under the Code" -- without being specific enough to bring down censorial intervention.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE GREAT MOMENT (Paramount, 1944) Written, produced and directed by Preston Sturges; based on "Triumph over Pain" by Rene Fulop-Miller; Camera, Victor Milner; Music, Victor Young; Art Direction, Hans Dreier and Ernest Feige; Assistant Director, Edmund Bernouly, 86 mins. With: Joel McCrea (W.T.O. Morton); Betty Field (Elizabeth Morton); Harry Carey (Prof. Warren); William Demarest (Eben Frost); Louis Jean Heydt (Dr. Horace Wells); Julius Tannen (Dr. Jackson); Edwin Maxwell (Vice President, Medical Society); Porter Hall (President Pierce); Franklyn Pangborn (Dr. Heywood); Grady Sutton (Homer Quimby); Donnsee Lee (Betty Morton); Harry Hayden (Judge Shipman); Torben Meyer (Dr. Dahlmeyer); Vic Potel (Dental patient); Thurston Hall (Senator Borland); J. Parrell MacDonald (The Priest); Robert Dudley (Charles); Robert Fransen (Mr. Abbot); Sylvia Field (Young mother); Reginald Sheffield (Young father); Robert Greig (Morton's butler); Sheila Sheldrake (Mrs. Bywater); Frank Morgan (Porter); Dewey Robinson (Col.Lawson); Alan Bridge (Mr. Stone); Georgia Caine (Mrs Whitman); George Melford (Dr. Hayden); Roscoe Ates (Sign painter); Emory Parnell (Mr. Gruber); Chester Conklin (Frightened patient); Esther Howard (streetwalker); Wilson Benge (Porter); Byron Foulger (Receptionist); Harry Tyler (reporter); Henry Roquemore (NY Herald reporter); Jimmy Conlin (Mr. Burnett) Arthur Hoyt
Deliberately excluded from Sturges retrospectives, "The Great Moment", like its co-feature tonight, has been intentionally swept under the rug for many years. Made two years before its ultimate release, and finally shown only after Sturges had left Paramount following two successful zany comedies, "The Great Moment" was subjected to considerable tampering in those intervening years. The following notes were written in August 1966, on the occasion of my own last showing of the film. From a purely personal reaction standpoint, they don't need to be adjusted ... but in the meantime additional research and published books on Sturges have provided more information on what went on. There's no space here to delve into that, but I'll incorporate some of that material into the pre-screening introduction this evening.

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The least successful of Sturges' Paramount films of the early 40's, and the least known, "The Great Moment" has always been shunted aside as a mistake that is most charitably forgotten. Therefore it is rather rewarding to look at it today and find that, even admitting its shortcomings, it has a great deal of power and beauty. While the erratic Sturges can't sidestep responsibility, at the same time it is a matter of record, as well as being self-evident from the film itself, that Paramount, concerned about its marketability, did a great deal of reshuffling and re-editing. The structure is now awkward and inconclusive, and because Sturges was then such a major comedy name, one suspects that all of the comedy material he shot was retained while other material was dropped, this resulting in a final work in which comedy, though not dominating, tends to overbalance the serious aspects rather more than originally. Paramount's indecisions are also reflected in the number of title changes the film went through before the rather uninspired present title was selected ......

Comparison with "Passionn' Verdu" is perhaps not inappropriate. Sturges' comedy was usually gay and lunitic rather than black; yet the juxtaposition of wild slapstick with the theme of a dedicated attempt to relieve pain by the development of anesthsia results in a curious mood which was hardly likely to be understood or fully accepted in the early 40's, while today - in the wake of films like "Dr. Strangelove" and "The Loved One" - such a mood is comparatively commonplace ...... The film also makes a rather strange and parallel companion piece to the British "The Magic Box". Both films tend to stress the personal pathos in the lives of Dr. Norton and Friese-Greene, and to be inconclusive about the value and results of their achievements. There is little emotional involvement with Dr. Norton at all, but this may be due in part to the now rather confusing construction, since the use of an unresolved flashback plays havoc with the sense of time. On the whole though the individual elements are so good that one suspects that the original work, as completed by Sturges, must have been rather impressive. Certainly there are no signs of awkwardness or indecision within the film; the comedy sequences work well and are genuinely funny, the uncomfortable aspects of dentistry are hurdles with taste but not via side-stepping, and the wholly dramatic episodes are often surprisingly moving. Virtually the film is most impressive, especially with some extremely thoughtful composition and some beautifully designed studio "exteriors" - at a time when most such exteriors were over-glossy and painfully artificial. They are stylised rather than realistic here, almost in the way that the grey rocks and pale skies were unreal but impressionistically effective in "Frankenstein".

The climactic shot of the film is beautifully designed and a real breath-taker, but dramatically it arrives far too suddenly. It would be typical of Sturges to use such a carefully constructed shot almost as a throwaway, and it would be useful to know if this indeed was his original ending, or if he faded out and went on to something else. As it is, it has the look of being pounced on by some Paramount bright boy as being such an overpowering shot that it could solve all their problems, and give them an "instant" climax.

To anyone who doesn't know Sturges (there are a few, sad to say!) and who doesn't know the history of the film itself, it still stands on its own as both an amusing and moving and decidedly off-beat film, with a marvellous array of 40's character players, most of them regulars in the Sturges Repertory Company.

William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10.25.

Discussion period follows