THE SHEIK (Paramount, 1921) Directed by George Melford; screenplay by Monte M. Katterjohn from the novel by Edith M. Hull; Camera, William Marshall; 70 mins approx.

With: Agnes Ayres (Diana Maye); Rudolph Valentino (Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan); Adolphe Menjou (Raoul de Saint Hubert); Walter Long (Omar); Lucien Littlefield (Gaston); George Wagner (Youssef); F.R. Butler (Sir Aubrey Maye)

Considering its fame, this original "The Sheik" has been unshown for a very long time. One reason may well be that Paramount took little care in preserving it and surviving copies are only adequate; the more likely reason is that it is quite inferior to its sequel, "Son of the Sheik", which has been in reissue circulation (including later on tv) since the mid-1950's. To the best of my knowledge, the last big commercial showing of "The Sheik" was in the mid-1930's at the Astor in London with a full orchestra. Unlike "Son..." which was delightedly tongue-in-cheek, the original took itself very seriously, and lacked the stylish design that William Cameron Menzies brought to the sequel. It was based on the 1919 novel that had become something of a cause celebre at the time, and while both less exotic and erotic than one might expect, was a huge success. In introduced a whole series of imitators (and imitators of Valentino), brought the word "sheik" into common usage in American slang, and its oriental influences could be found even in such unlikely American subject matter as "Skinners" (or, as they called it, "Skinners for the White Gassle and Guard" - 1921 was a big year for Valentino, starting with "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", followed by three other Metro films, then "The Sheik" as the first of his Paramount films, followed by "Moran of the Lady Letty", SIX films in one year, the biggest new name in Hollywood, and yet he was denied star billing in all of them, and was not even carefully nurtured and groomed by Paramount. Star status really had to be earned in those days, regardless of boxoffice returns!

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

THE IRON MASK (Elton Corp., United Artists, 1929) Directed by Allan Dwan; Story by Elton Thomas (Fairbanks) and scenario by Lotta Woods from the novels "The Three Musketeers" and "20 Years After" by Alexandre Dumas; Camera, Henry Sharp; Assistant Director, Bruce R. Humber; Assistant Director, Art DiPietro; Associate Director, Ben Corrèe; William Cameron Menzies. (Produced in 1926 with one or two sound interpolations and a song, ingredients that are now missing). 90 mins approx.

With: Douglas Fairbanks (D'Artagnan); Marguerite de la Mette (Constance); Belle Bennett (The Queen Mother); Dorothy Revier (Lady de Winter); William Bakewell (Louis XIV and his twin); Vera Lewis (Madame Peronne); Ulrich Haupt (Rochefort); Gordon Thorpe (Young Louis and his twin); Nigel de Brulier (Cardinal Richelieu); Lon Peff (Father Joseph); Charles Stevens (Planchet); Relle Sedan (Louis XIII); Leon Barx (Athos); Stanley Sanford (Porthos); Cino Cerrado (Aramis); Henry Otto (The King's Valet).

From 1921 and the relative beginning of Valentino's career to 1929 and the virtual end of Fairbanks'. It was his last silent swashbuckler and a good one, but it Americanized wist-motion by "skinner's stress. It was the first time that Fairbanks allowed himself to age on screen, and certainly the first time he died (exceeding "gag" deaths such as the one in "Wild and Woolly" where he goes out in a blaze of glory as his own ancestor). Constance, the heroine, is also killed off at the half-way mark; possibly feeling it was a mistake, Doug resurrects her in a comic flashback, and then feeling that this might be a mistake, recalls the earlier tragedy by repeating her death in another flashback! Based on two very complicated Dumas novels, it has a lot of plot and character to play with, and doesn't really get around to the story of the man in the iron mask late in the film at all (or, as James Whale remake of 1939, using a few establishing stock shots from this film, reshaped history considerably but did restructure the plot well to concentrate on the Iron Mask theme). Also, while an expensive film, it seems to have economised quite a bit in the casting of Doug's fellow musketeers. All three are played by relatively lesser players. True, Leon Barx played Athos in the earlier "Three Musketeers" too, but his cohorts there were George Siegmund and Eugene Pallette, who had a great deal more panache than Sanford and Corrèe.

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It has been a long time since this original "The Iron Mask" has been shown, partly because of the early 50's reissue with a music track and an added narration by Doug Jr. That was rather a well-done version, though substantially shortened, and with some curious optical effects to allow a scene to run long enough to accommodate the accompanying narration. (At one point a river's flow changes direction in mid-scene and goes back where it came from!)
It's good to have the full if slightly slower-paced version back again, though it's an odd print and one whose ancestry is difficult to ascertain. It looks as though it was taken from the original negative (or a surviving original 35mm print) after slight decomposition had set in. I wish it looked like the breath-taking original print of "Don Q, Son of Zorro" that we ran a couple of years back. It doesn't, but it's adequate, and one can read through the slightly diminished visual quality to see the stunning compositions achieved (sometimes quite simply, as in the enlarged shadows of the conspirators as they wait for the kidnapped King) by cameraman Sharp and a whole battery of art directors, not all credited, but including Ben Carré and William Cameron Menzies.

Incidentally, the curious silent "speech" at the mid-way point is of course, where one of the original film's dialogue sections took place. Fairbanks, in literary/poetic style, summed up the passage of time and the spirit of adventure, and launched us into part two of the story. In the 50's re-release, Fairbanks Jr. did a good job of imitating his father's voice in re-doing this scene. (We played this version is our very first series, 22 years ago).

The first Fairbanks "Three Musketeers" had been directed by Fred Nible. Dwan, who directed this sequel, also directed the 1939 spoof-remake with the Ritz Brothers, a film that managed to be both a good spoof and a good swashbuckler, pulling off the neat trick of having everybody but the Ritz Brothers play it straight.

For the record, although the film is copyrighted at 11 reels, that was mainly to accommodate the use of sound and music. A reel is officially 1000 ft in 35mm, but in those transition days would often run far shorter in order to finish at the end of a key sequence. In actual footage, the film runs between eight and nine reels, and our print is fully complete.

-- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:30
Discussion period follows.