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Dartmouth Film Society

THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI (1947)

Michael O'Hara	Orson Welles	Prosecutor	Carl Frank
Elsa Bannister	Rita Hayworth	Jake	Louis Merrill
Arthur Bannister	Everett Sloane	Taxi Driver	Harry Shannon
George Grisby	Glenn Anders	Bessie	Evelyn Ellis
Sidney Broome	Ted de Corsia	Li	Wong Show Chong
Goldie	Gus Schilling	Captain	Sam Nelson
The Judge	Erskine Sandford		

Scenario and dialogue by Orson Welles, after a novel by Sherwood King. Photographed by Charles Lawton, Jr. Music by Heinz Roemheld. Song, "Don't Take Your Arms Away", by Roberts and Fisher. Sets by Wilbur Menefee and Herman Schoenbrun. Costumes by Jean-Louis. Artistic direction by Stephen Goosens and Sturges Carne. Sound by Lodge Cunningham. Edited by Viola Lawrence. Produced by Richard Wilson and William Castle for Columbia Pictures. Released June 1948.

Directed by ORSON WELLES

There is no more bizarre personality in the history of American film than Orson Welles, and he never made a more bizarre film than *THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI*, which is saying a lot. Sneaked into release almost a year after it was finished, it was generally neglected by critics and viewers, and came into its own only when it began to appear on television. Since then, it has become so popular that there is a "Lady from Shanghai" club which meets in New York every time it is telecast. And these fans are not so strange as they might seem; it takes several viewings to understand just how great this film is.

THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI was made under rather peculiar circumstances. Some years earlier, Welles needed a loan and called up Harry "White Fang" Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures. In return for the money, Welles offered to make a film for the terrible-tempered Cohn, and when this suspicious executive asked for an outline, Welles made up a fantastic story on the spot, based on a novel he had read. Cohn was so amazed at the story outline that he advanced the money, and a few years later, Welles went to Columbia to make the film.

Unfortunately, in the interim Welles had forgotten most of the plot outline he had told Cohn, so he made up a new story using some of the earlier details. Columbia was a studio not particularly noted for its devotion to art in film, but the prestige plus box-office of Welles and Hayworth was too much to resist. The wildly inventive script was shot as written, and only slightly re-edited for release. It is, oddly enough, one of the few Welles' films to be shown almost exactly as it was made.

The story concerns a trio of very peculiar criminals: a corrupt attorney, his enigmatic but deadly wife, and a lawyer going mad under the fear of atomic destruction. Their victim, who will be sacrificed in the execution of a superbly intricate murder plan, is a sailor-poet. In the end, the three villains are destroyed (along with several other characters) in a very ingenious manner, but their victim survives to tell the story, if just barely.

The film has been accused, perhaps justly, as being too tricky for its own good. We are never sure who killed whom, and it took this writer about three viewings to straighten it out. However, the solution is given very carefully in an off-screen narration; but Welles has the last laugh because the moment it is given away, the visuals are so fascinating (O'Hara is sliding through a fun-house) that one doesn't listen. Apparently Welles didn't care much about the story; the viewer who does is advised to shut his eyes and concentrate on the dialogue at this point.

There are references to other films. The picnic is straight out of *CITIZEN KANE*, as are some of the actors (Everett Sloane, Erskine Sandford and others). The love scene in front of the fish is lots of fun; it was actually first tried in Rex Ingram's *MARE NOSTRUM* in 1926. But many of the other ideas are original.

The star of the film is undoubtedly Glenn Anders, a stage actor who seems to have appeared in only this one film. His characterization of George Grisby is unforgettable,

and it is unfortunate that he is eliminated before the last third of the film. Surely his delivery of the line "Another George Grisby special coming up" will assure him of cinematic immortality.

THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI can be taken on several levels. One is that of pure entertainment. One critic has called it "a morality play without preachment, a profound drama of decay," which is quite another way of analyzing it. The characters are quite interesting. Bannister is evil, but he truly loves his wife. Elsa is thoroughly corrupt, but never seems to realize how bad she is. (The title is somewhat misleading; we learn that she was born in Manchuria and speaks Chinese but that's about as far as the mysterious East is mentioned.) Grisby is more enigmatic; his feigned madness has become quite real. O'Hara is less successful. The Irish brogue appears and disappears from scene to scene, as if Welles' forgot about it.

The film ends with the distortion of a house of mirrors, but in fact almost everything else has been distorted up to this point. Particularly interesting is the courtroom sequence, which is interrupted with spectators having sneezing and laughing fits, ending in a Max Sennett chase through the Judge's chambers. If this was not enough, Welles brings in a Chinese opera and something resembling the Black Dragon Society. It is curious to note that in the House of Mirrors sequence, sections were photographed in what appears to be wide-screen, with the top and bottom of the screen masked off to give the illusion of width.

One critic wrote, "THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI remains Welles' wildest, most restless picture and one of his most elusively significant. Behind the magical showmanship is the voice of a poet decrying the sin and corruption of a confused world. And O'Hara, the victim, the innocent, has been irrevocably touched by the abyss into which he fell: 'Maybe I'll live so long I'll forget her, maybe I'll die trying.'"

--David Hull

Films of Orson Welles: CITIZEN KANE (1941); THE MAGNIFICENT ANDERSONS (1942); JOURNEY INTO FEAR (credited to Norman Foster) (1942); THE STRANGER (1946); THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI (1947); MACBETH (1947); OTHELLO (1952); MR. ARKADIN (also called CONFIDENTIAL REPORT) (1955); TOUCH OF EVIL (1957); DON QUIXOTE (unfinished) (1959); THE TRIAL (1962); CHIMES AT MIDNIGHT (in production).

This is our last program of the winter term. The spring film society program begins April 2 with SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER (1959); SHE DONE HIM WRONG (1933) on April 3; THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES (1946) on April 4 & 5 and GABRIEL OVER THE WHITE HOUSE (1933) on April 7. Other films selected include: THE THIRD MAN (1949); JULES ET JIM (1961); THE SEVEN SAMURAI (1954); THE BIRTH OF A NATION (1915); SENSO (1954); LOS OLVIDADOS (1950); THE STRONG MAN (1927); THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (1919); BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN (1925); ON THE WATERFRONT (1954); MANSLAUGHTER (1922); WHAT PRICE GLORY? (1927); HELL'S ANGELS (1930); SOUS LES TOITS DE PARIS (1930); AFTER THE THIN MAN (1936); CITIZEN KANE (1941); THE BODY (1964). Booklets available after spring holidays.