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"THE DEVIL DOLL" (MGM, 1936) Directed by Tod Browning

Screenplay by Browning, Erich von Stroheim, Garrett Fort and Guy Endore from the novel "Burn Witch Burn" by Abraham Merritt;

Camera: Leonard Smith; 82 minutes

With Lionel Barrymore, Maureen O'Sullivan, Frank Lawton, Henry B. Walthall, Lucy Beaumont, Robert Greig, Arthur Hohl, Grace Ford, Pedro de Cordoba, Rafaela Ottiano, Juanita Quigley, Claire du Brey, Rollo Lloyd, E. Allyn Warren, Eily Malyon, Egon Brecher, Frank Reicher, Billy Gilbert.

Tod Browning's second-from-last film shouldn't be confused with two much more recent British thrillers, a "Devil Doll" that has its inspiration in the ventriloquist sequence of "Dead of Night", and a "Burn Witch Burn" which derives not from Merritt's sci-fi novel but from Fritz Leiber's "Conjure Wife".

Browning's films have usually had one major flaw: a dynamic and bizarre opening that is both disturbing and attention-getting (and "Dracula" of course is the perfect illustration) and then a steady decline into stagey and talkative melodramatics. Not a few of his films, and especially the silents "The White Tiger" and "The Show", not only didn't live up to their openings, but even contrived - at the half-way mark - to get all the characters locked up in a single room, so that the final denouements were claustrophobic as well as static. Quite certainly, he had a greater talent as a morbid, bizarre and ironic story-teller than as a film-maker; his films invariably carried far more promise and potential than they usually delivered. (One wonders how he might have fared teaming up with a director who took the opposite tack, starting slowly and then building steadily to a magnificent climax. A Browning collaboration with a John Ford or a D.W. Griffith might have been rewarding indeed!)

To an extent, "The Devil Doll" falls into some of his usual traps. The opening scenes are beautiful: mysterious abstract credits dissolving into a scene of eerie menace where that menace is not immediately identified. But thereafter, thanks no little to the