

Naval spectacle

Do you like sea battles? Then don't miss **The Admiral Roaring Currents**, a CJ Entertainment Blu-ray (UPC#851339004388, \$30). Directed by Kim Han-Min, the 2014 Korean film depicts a 300-type moment in Korean history, near the beginning of the Seventeenth Century, when a dozen Korean ships guarding a choke point with complex tides held off several hundred invading Japanese ships. Running 128 minutes, the first half-hour sets everything up, introducing the primary characters, the intelligence gathering and the subterfuge that preceded the battle. There is also a small romantic subplot that pays off quite effectively at a climactic moment. Thanks to modern special effects, the battle sequences are fantastic, delineating the strategies that each side is attempting to execute and the unexpected problems that must be dealt with on the fly. There is just enough development of the characters—the hero is the disgraced but canny admiral in charge of the defense, played by Choi Min-Sik—to give the battle meaning, and from there, the widescreen spectacle, enhanced by a terrific DTS audio track, generates a steady volley of thrills.

The audio track defaults to English, but after listening to it for a couple of moments, we selected the original Korean track with English subtitling, which blended more appealingly with the action on the screen. On both, the separation effects are superbly detailed and pack a solid punch. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The special effects are seamless and hues are crisp. A decent 5-minute production featurette is included, along with two trailers and a 30-minute abridgement of the feature that basically gives you a quick version of the entire film.

Japanese gangsters, old and new—ish

Lest you think that Yasujiro Ozu had a Martin Scorsese phase, rest assured that the trio of films featured in the Criterion Collection *Eclipse Series 42* release, **Silent Ozu Three Crime Dramas** (UPC#715515145114, \$45), are just as touchy-feely as all of Ozu's other movies. Two of the films are fairly simplistic. In the 1930 *Walk Cheerfully*, a gangster falls for a 'good' girl and tries to go straight so that he can be with her. The story is an eternal one, but rather than focusing on the action, as most filmmakers would, Ozu focuses on the relationship and the emotions of the characters. Running 90 minutes, the image compositions are outstanding, and the blocking and staging of individual scenes are always invigorating. Additionally, the emotional interiors of the characters are clearly expressed without resorting to archaic acting mannerisms, but the story is so obvious that there is never any doubt as to where it is leading. A little violence would have indeed spiced things up, but that just isn't going to happen. The plot of the 1930 *That Night's Wife* is even more straightforward. A thief steals money to help his ailing child. A cop follows him, but ends up sitting with him in the apartment overnight to make sure the kid is okay, before taking him in. Again, the psychologies of the characters are expressed clearly, but with a sophisticated reserve worthy of modern performances. Running 65 minutes, however, that is all there is to the film, and there are fewer opportunities than there were in *Walk Cheerfully* to enliven the film with a variety of images.

The third movie, however, is much more complex and engaging. *Dragnet Girl*, from 1933 but still silent (the unions resisted sound for a long time), is in part a duplication of *Walk Cheerfully*, but with more energized elaborations. A gangster becomes attracted to the sister of a boxer, although the sister is trying to explicate the boxer from the gangster's world (boxing was nominally part of *Walk Cheerfully*, as well, but in *Dragnet Girl* it actually advances the plot). The gangster's mistress is upset, but even she is charmed by the sister when she finally meets her. Running 100 minutes, the film, although still focused closely on the relationships, is much more centered in the classic gangster milieu, and its outcome is far less predictable.

The full screen black-and-white source material on all three films is ragged but watchable. All three are accompanied by basic monophonic piano scores by Neil Brand that generally do not interfere with the proceedings. The intertitles are in Japanese, with optional English translations.

Totally cool Jō Shishido stars in the 1967 Nikkatsu Studios production, **Massacre Gun**, an Arrow Blu-ray release (UPC#760137720591, \$40). At first glance, it seems like the viewer is stepping right back into the world of *Dragnet Girl*. Running 89 minutes, the film is about a mob war that is kindled when a boxer rebels at having to wait his turn for the big fight. His owner punishes him, and the boxer's brothers then retaliate. Shishido plays the eldest brother. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and in glorious, crisp black and white, the film, directed by Yasuharu Hasebe, has an exquisite and integral jazz score (Shishido's character runs a nightclub) by Naozumi Yamamoto. Gloriously violent (on par with **Bonnie and Clyde**) and set in a town where apparently no policemen exist, the film may not be quite as focused on the interiors of the characters as Ozu would choose, but there are plenty of emotional connections between the two gangs and within the gangs. It is the film's stylistic embellishments—at one point, characters are chased into an empty industrial area, but there is a large structure burning in the background, for no apparent reason other than it looks really awesome—which seem inspired by its score, that make it so compellingly watchable. If Ozu used his sensitivity for human feelings to enhance the crime template, Hasebe uses a more superficial aesthetic, yet because the viewer is responding

to that aesthetic emotionally, the result is just as successful and just as valid; or it is the basis for an age-old gang war between the interior and the exterior that will never be resolved.

The picture is spotless. The monophonic sound seems to verge on dimensionality at times, and is worth amplifying. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles, and comes with a trailer, a small collection of cute black-and-white still photos, a very nice 18-minute interview with the elderly but still spry Shishido, talking about his life, his career and what he remembers of **Massacre Gun**, and a 36-minute talk by film historian Tony Rayns that essentially supplies a thumbnail history of the entire Japanese film industry, with an emphasis how the market and artistic orientations eventually led to movies like **Massacre Gun**. The entire piece is a static shoulders-and-head shot of Rayns talking, but illustrative stills occasionally pop up in the left corner of the screen.

A DVD platter is also included in the set, with the same special features, although the film's image is not quite as crisp, and the sound is not quite as full.

Lengthy silent

It wasn't until television achieved its adolescence that filmmakers seriously began to adapt novels in multiple parts, utilizing the marketing of individual episodes to support the creation of the greater whole. Early efforts, such as *Jude the Obscure* and **Rich Man Poor Man** led not only to a flowering of bestseller adaptations on the TV screen, but subsequent dramas that charted the narrative arc of their seasons around a modest number of episodes serving a larger but complete narrative. Previous to that, motion pictures would simply adapt one part of a novel, such as what was done with the first **East of Eden**, or would abridge the story to its most famous passages, as innumerable classic films have done. But there were attempts to film entire novels that go back to the silent era. Although held in contempt for good reason nowadays, the first great motion picture of length, D.W. Griffith's **Birth of a Nation**, was adapted from a bestseller and strove to convey at least some of that narrative's scope in its multiple-hour length. The most ambitious effort of all, Erich Von Stroheim's 1924 **Greed**, was successfully completed, but could not be broken down into marketable parts with cliffhanger conclusions, and was thus butchered in an attempt to compile a viable single feature out of the mass of material.

In 1923, French filmmaker Ivan Mosjoukine completed **The House of Mystery [La Maison du Mystere]**, a ten-episode drama that has been released in a three-platter set by Flicker Alley (UPC#617311678196, \$60). Although there are a couple of literal cliffhanging moments, and plenty of action, including a knock-down drag-out fight that rivals Alfred Hitchcock's kitchen fight in **Torn Curtain**, the film, a serialized adaptation of a novel by Jules Mary, is too much of a drama to be considered a cliffhanger serial, and too expansive in scope, spanning more than a decade of time, to be a soap opera. The hero, played by Ivan Mosjoukine, is framed for a murder that the villain, played by Charles Vanel, committed, and spends the rest of the film escaping from incarceration and trying to prove his innocence, while protecting his wife and daughter, whom Vanel's character would very much like to make his own. There are a number of striking sequences, most notably a beautiful wedding scene that is played out in silhouette, like a Southeast Asian puppet show, and when the film begins to build to its climax, it becomes harder and harder to take a break. Some of the performances are terribly overstated and clichéd, although Mosjoukine is quite good (he wears a number of disguises over the course of the film) and when he's away from the plot for a while, you really start to miss his maturity. Running 383 minutes, the program is best viewed in moderate installments, but each segment has enough variation and excitement to sustain a viewer's interest.

Each platter has a 'Play All' option. Some segments of the program are tinted, but most are not. The presentation, which is in full screen format with an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback, is naturally rather aged, and contrasts are a little light at times, but the image quality is generally adequate. There is a marathon piano score by Neil Brand, which is centered, but reasonably strong and rarely intrusive. The intertitles are in French, with optional English subtitling. A 3-minute montage of captioned production and promotional photos is also included.

A favorite

Back before there were laser discs, we had a hefty collection of motion picture soundtrack LPs, basically because at the time, owning the musical scores and the original posters (which we also had a closet full of) were the closest thing we could come to owning a movie, until, with the advent of LDs, we could own a movie. Anyway, out of all of those musical scores, and all of the ones that we have obtained or heard since, our absolute favorite remains Jerry Goldsmith's soundtrack to George Cukor's 1969 adaptation of Lawrence Durrell's **Justine**. A romantic miasma sprinkled with Middle Eastern spices, the music on the album is like a flower opening in the morning sun, although curiously, the orchestrations on the film's actual soundtrack are somewhat different—either different balance levels or completely different takes—so that having the DVD, which we thought we could cross off of our dwindling 'want' list thanks to the 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment Fox *Cinema Archives* release (UPC#024543105008, \$20), this audiophile anomaly can be shared by every fan.