55 DAYS AT PEKING (1963)

55 DAYS AT PEKING directed by NICHOLAS RAY
WEDNESDAY MARCH 12th 7pm



A film of such grand scale - and such absurd and continued production issues - that it is startling it exists, **55 Days at Peking** is a marvelously produced insight into the American Imperialist mindset of the 1960s. Starring Charlton Heston, Ava Gardner, and David Niven as members of the occupying foreign nations in 1900 China, it details the downfall of the Boxer Rebellion, a nationalist final gambit on the part of Imperial China to repel Western religious, financial, and political interests in the country. While a traditional historical drama, its period-accurate sets, turbulent production, and poor distribution make it a unique entry in historical fiction filmmaking.

Producer Samuel Bronston, known for historical epics, pursued accuracy within his limited personal historical perspective.Filmed in Spain, the set was a nearly 60-acre sprawling recreation of historical Peking (Beijing), so accurate that it could be mapped one-to-one to the historical district in the city itself. Costumes included both accurate recreations and genuine Imperial Chinese court clothing, and over 1,500 Asian extras were cast. However, filming began without a finished script, leading to frantic and not entirely successful rewrites. Ava Gardner, remarkably difficult on set and often inebriated, had her character written out of the script to shorten her filming time – and even then many of her final lines had to be reassigned to other characters.

Despite it all – the inherent pro-Imperialist message (Bronston, despite using Asian actors as extras, still cast white actors for almost all the major Chinese characters), the issues with script, cast, and crew, the theatrical underperformance, 55 Days at Peking is still an absolute feat of production and massive cast orchestration. Its lush costuming, set design, strong cast (despite Gardner's struggles), and impressive handling of battle scenes make it something to behold – especially if the audience is able to approach the historical events with a lens 55 Days' many directors lacked.